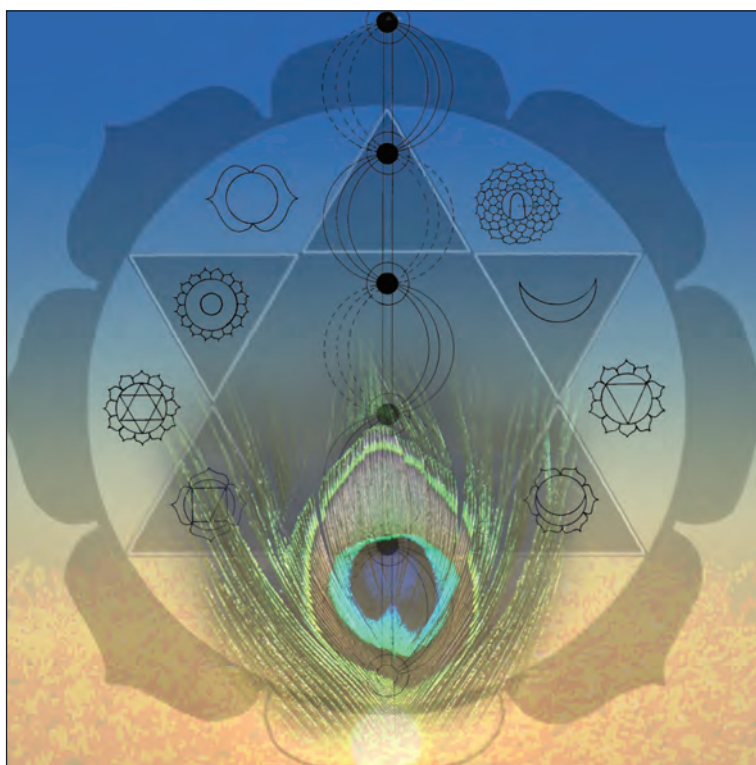


Thoughts on the Gita

Dr Rishi Vivekananda



Yoga Publications Trust, Munger, Bihar, India

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With kind regards, ॐ and prem

Sriani Niranjan

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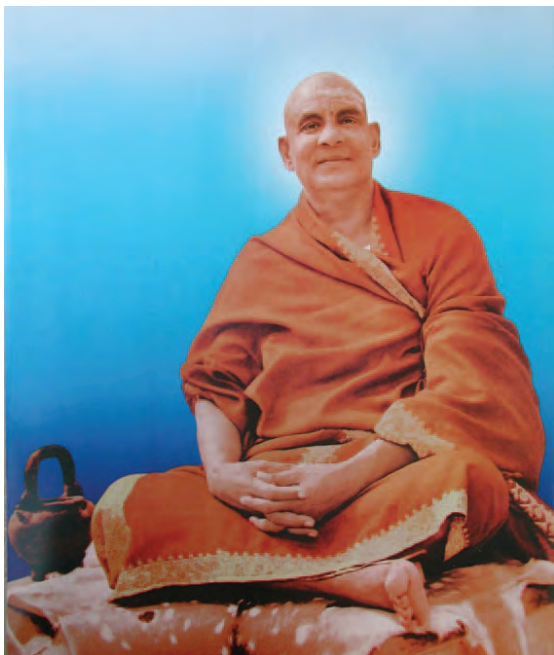
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Dedication

*In humility we offer this dedication to
Swami Sivananda Saraswati, who initiated
Swami Satyananda Saraswati into the secrets of yoga.*

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Introduction

People use the *Bhagavad Gita* as a handbook of instructions for living. In India, many people worship the book and its principles. Millions of people read it every day, and often they will take just one verse or a small number of verses and try to apply it in their interactions over the course of the day.

One of the beauties of such multidimensional works as the *Bhagavad Gita* is that even though there is incredible depth to it, it is still accessible to the ordinary person on the superficial level, and it contains meaningful advice for living one's life. Even the un-initiated will derive great benefit from exposure to it.

There are many versions of the *Gita* in print. Often there are no exact equivalents in English of Sanskrit words, and this is especially true where the meanings can be as deep as they are in the *Bhagavad Gita*. Thus all sorts of interpretations as to the meanings of the individual passages are available, and indeed there is not any agreement as to what the chapter titles should be. Many editions have different chapter headings, and the translations can differ widely.

The *Gita* is not just a story. *Gita* means a song or a poem, and *Bhagavad Gita* then means 'Song of God'. In its original Sanskrit, it is a beautiful piece of poetry with its own rhythm and metre. In the Satyananda ashrams in India, the whole *Gita* is chanted by singing the verses to a tune twice a month. However, when it is translated directly into English, the

syntax is often cumbersome, sentences are reversed, and meanings can be difficult to understand. So the questions arise, what translation do we use, what commentary do we choose? There are some translations in which modern syntax is used and the English is clear and simple where even gender bias is eliminated, but one wonders if they have perhaps thrown the baby out with the bathwater and lost some of the richness and depth.

The version used in this commentary is the *Srimad Bhagavad Gita* from Gita Press, Gorakhpur, which is the version used in the Bihar School of Yoga and other Satyananda Yoga centres in India, and is the version from which most of the translated verses were taken. Other versions used here are the *Bhagavad Gita* by Swami Sivananda, Divine Life Society, *The Holy Geeta* by Swami Chinmayananda, Chinmaya Mission, the *Bhagavad Gita* by Ramananda Prasad, International Gita Society, the *Abbreviated Version of the Bhagavad Gita* by Harry Bhalla, International Gita Society, and lectures by Swami Niranjanananda, Peethadheesh of the Bihar School of Yoga, India.

The *Bhagavad Gita*, which forms a part the great epic *Mahabharata*, consists of a dialogue between the great warrior prince Arjuna and his friend and charioteer Sri Krishna, although Sri Krishna is also presented as an incarnation of the Supreme Being. He was certainly considered that way by the person or people who put the *Gita* together, as demonstrated by the fact that the *Gita* has, in many places, Sri Krishna using the word 'I' when he is referring to God.

The *Bhagavad Gita* consists of seven hundred verses divided into eighteen chapters. Throughout the *Gita* there is much repetition, and as we are dealing with it in its entirety, we will need to omit the repetition. Of course if we were examining only a few verses at a time each day, as many people do, the repetitions would become necessary to regularly remind the readers of the most important principles. It is these principles that we will emphasize here, and rather than providing a commentary on each chapter,

this small book deals with the life lessons contained in the *Gita* one chapter at a time.

The dialogue takes place on *Kurukshetra*, the field of battle. The armies on each side represent two sides of the same royal family, the Pandavas, to which Arjuna belongs, and their cousins the Kauravas. On the other side of the battlefield Arjuna sees many of his family, teachers, friends and others who have been close to him in the past, and it is now his job to kill them. He seriously contemplates throwing down his arms and allowing himself to be killed by the enemy rather than kill all those people who have been so dear to him in the past. However, Sri Krishna reminds Arjuna of his true duty, and this is the main theme of the *Gita*. Sri Krishna insists that he must perform his duty by fighting the war, with the mindset of doing it simply for the sake of the duty, with faith in God, and with equanimity in success or defeat, gain or loss.

Symbolism of the *Bhagavad Gita*

Swami Sivananda has said that the whole world is a battlefield. The real Kurukshetra, the true battlefield, is within each of us, and the Mahabharata war is raging there. We haven't yet delved into the story of the *Gita*, but an introduction to the symbolism in the *Gita* is relevant here. King Dhritarashtra, the father of the main combatants of the Kauravas, is blind. His blindness is symbolic of his ignorance and our own ignorance, as well. Arjuna symbolizes the individual soul within each of us, and Sri Krishna is the spiritual aspect of the soul, our spiritual essence. The chariot symbolizes the human body, while the five horses are the senses which have to be controlled as the charioteer controls the chariot.

Swami Sivananda has said, "The enemies are the mind, the ego and the senses", and this is mentioned often in the *Gita*. If we are to evolve to our highest potential, we must observe, realize and manage our *samskaras* and *vasanas*. *Samskaras* are the deep mental impressions from our past

experiences that remain embedded in our memories. These samskaras propel our *vasanas*, the latent tendencies and desires, which cause us to act in the same way, time and time again. It is our samskaras, our *raga* and *dvesha* or likes and dislikes, and the cravings that result from them that drag us down into such negative expressions as greed, lust, anger, conceit, jealousy and hypocrisy.

The *Gita* begins with a simple but practical question that Arjuna asks of himself: ‘Should I fight in this war?’ and then the story develops far beyond that. Arjuna wants to throw away his bow and arrows and go to live as a beggar. Sri Krishna tells him it would be wrong for him to do that. Arjuna asks Sri Krishna what he should do, thereby acknowledging that Sri Krishna is his guru. This question gives Sri Krishna the opportunity to present a very large amount of spiritual information and down-to-earth practical advice about the best way for Arjuna and the rest of us human beings to live our lives.

One of the great merits of the *Gita* is that it integrates different points of view. Around the time that the *Gita* was written, the bhaktas were convinced that bhakti is the only way to realize our spiritual essence, thus telling everyone else that they were going in the wrong direction. The jnanis stated that the only way to God is through divine wisdom and realization. The karma yogis believed that the only way to God is through selfless service in the world, and the raja yogis perceived meditation as the only path. The *Gita* brought all these perspectives together as an integrated way of living life through the four paths defined by the classical sanatana dharma tradition: the paths of devotion, knowledge, action and meditation.

Sanatana dharma is the traditional philosophical and social belief system of India. It has sometimes been called Hinduism; however, it is not really a formal religion in the sense that the West knows it. The word ‘Hindu’ was coined by the British when they lived in India, and it has more to do with the Indus River than with sanatana dharma.

The Mahabharata war

The *Mahabharata* is ‘the great epic of the Bharata dynasty’; it is one of the two main Sanskrit epics of India, the other being the *Ramayana*. It describes the struggle for supremacy between two groups of royal cousins, the Pandavas and the Kauravas, and contained within the *Mahabharata* is the *Bhagavad Gita*. The *Gita* has a vast readership; there are likely to be hundreds of millions of copies in circulation, and these copies vary widely from the elegant and expensive to simple versions which are given away.

The entire *Mahabharata* consists of about 100,000 verses, which makes it seven times longer than Homer’s *Iliad* and *Odyssey* combined, and it is divided into eighteen sections. The author is considered to be the sage Vyasa, but there is a mystery about who actually wrote it, and also what the *Gita* is doing sitting in the middle of the *Mahabharata*, but one thing is certainly true: it neatly includes many of the principles of sanatana dharma. It is generally believed that the Mahabharata war occurred in 1302 BC, although some people claim that it took place 6,000 years ago and many historians believe it may have been even later than 1302 BC.

The conflict in the *Mahabharata* begins when Dhritarashtra, the elder of two princes, is bypassed to succeed as king because of his blindness and is replaced by his brother Pandu. However, Dhritarashtra later regains the throne when Pandu becomes a religious hermit, and the sons of Pandu, the five Pandava brothers Yudhishtira, Bhima, Arjuna, Nakula and Sahadeva, grow up in the royal court with the sons of Dhritarashtra, the Kauravas.

Jealousy and antagonism develop between the two groups of cousins, and the Pandavas are forced to leave the kingdom when their father dies. During their exile the Pandavas meet their cousin Sri Krishna, who remains their companion and helper from then on and who becomes crucial to the outcome of the subsequent war. The five jointly marry a princess called Draupadi, who enters their lives when Arjuna becomes betrothed to her after winning an archery competition. The five brothers bring her home and say to

their mother, who is in another room, “We have brought home some *prasad*”, thereby referring to Draupadi as a blessed gift, and the mother responds, “Well, make sure you share it with each other.” In those days sons always obeyed their mothers, so all the five brothers marry Draupadi.

The brothers and their wife return to the palace some years later, and King Dhritarashtra gives them a tract of arid land that seems to be useless for growing crops. However, with the help of Sri Krishna, the whole place blossoms, and they experience some years of prosperity in their part of the kingdom. However, once again they are forced to retire to the forest for thirteen years when the eldest brother, Yudhishtira, loses everything in a game of dice with the dishonest representative of the eldest of the Kauravas, Duryodhana. After serving their thirteen years of exile they return to claim their part of the kingdom, but Duryodhana refuses to give them even the area of property that would ‘fit on the point of a pin’. The resulting feud between the Kauravas and Pandavas culminates in the great battle on the field of Kurukshetra, presently in the state of Haryana, north of modern Delhi. This sets the stage for the *Bhagavad Gita*.

Another perspective

There are some interesting points to note about the tale of the *Mahabharata*:

1. The whole Mahabharata war is currently going on within us. It is a war between honesty and dishonesty, between greed and generosity, between ethics and treachery, between courage and cowardice, and between *swadharma*, one’s best direction in life, and *adharma*, living the wrong life.

2. The problem is that the *Mahabharata* epic is extremely large and very symbolic, and most people are not prepared to read a book that takes years to finish, only to receive a message they find hard to understand. So perhaps centuries later, some intelligent and gifted person, who may have been called Vedavyasa or even Adi Shankaracharya, decided to put a clear, didactic message into the middle of this

enormous epic. To do this he took the main character of the Mahabharata war, the hero warrior Arjuna, and gave him a nervous breakdown just as the war was about to start. This set the stage for the unfolding of all the lessons of the Upanishads which deal with humanity, the Supreme Consciousness and the way we should live our life. Arjuna is very much the student, and Sri Krishna is very much the teacher and authority whose role varies throughout the *Gita* as that of friend, mentor, guru and the earthly manifestation of God.

3. People have said that it is just not rational; if you read the *Gita*, the discussion between the two of them takes about three hours. The two armies are arrayed on either side, all the conches are blowing, and the soldiers of both sides are rattling their spears, bows and arrows on the verge of starting a massive battle. Then Sri Krishna and Arjuna come between them in the chariot and proceed to converse for three hours on the meaning of life.

If you look at it practically, it isn't very sensible; you would have thought that whoever wrote the *Gita* would have put it into another part of the story when things were not so busy. But Swami Sivananda had a very good answer for that; he said that a real spiritual master can transmit all that information into the mind of the disciple in a fraction of a second – a process called *shaktipat*, or divine transmission.

Anyone having any degree of the experience of enlightenment will realize that one can get a big overview of a vast amount of information in an instant through *shaktipat*. Many who have had a near-death experience, which may have only lasted minutes, will recall experiencing a replay of their whole life in just a moment of time. Therefore, the timeframe of the *Gita* does not have to be the same timeframe that we understand.

Let us now deal shortly with Chapter 1, which Swami Sivananda calls 'The Yoga of the Despondency of Arjuna', where despondency means unhappiness, discouragement, maybe even depression, and certainly extreme stress. Here is the scene:

Dhritarashtra, the blind king, had a counsellor called Sanjay, who by a form of extra-sensory perception, known nowadays as ‘remote viewing’, could see and hear what was happening on the battlefield and describe it to the king. The king asked him what was going on there, and Sanjay said that his eldest son Duryodhana had just gone up to his teacher and discussed the relative strengths of the two sides.

Then everybody started blowing their conches and rattling their weapons, as they were keen to intimidate the other side and get on with the battle. A great noise ensued between the two armies, and it was at that point that Arjuna, the commander of the Pandavas, asked his charioteer Sri Krishna to drive them to a position between the two forces so that he could view both sides.

The question that immediately comes to us here is, “How did the great Sri Krishna come to be in the apparently inferior position of Arjuna’s chariot driver?” This should be looked at in two ways, the literal reason and the symbolic reason.

Firstly, prior to the arrangement of the Mahabharata war, Sri Krishna offered his army to fight in the battle, but owing to mixed obligations to both sides, he offered the commanders of each army to choose between just himself alone as a chariot driver or the rest of his great army. Not surprisingly, the power-mad Duryodhana chose the army, and the faithful Arjuna chose just Sri Krishna. It was a fateful decision for both, because Sri Krishna, along with Arjuna, became a crucial factor in the outcome of the war.

From the symbolic point of view, as mentioned earlier, the chariot represents the body and mind, Arjuna represents the individual self, the five horses represent the five senses which must be kept under control, and Sri Krishna, the indweller of the soul, our spiritual essence, is the controller. When Arjuna saw the participants of the two great armies, he was horrified to realize that the people he had to kill were his kith and kin, those he had loved his whole life. This was an uncontrollable stress for him, and the rest of the *Gita* deals with how Sri Krishna helped him to manage it.

1

The Stress of Arjuna

The early part of the *Bhagavad Gita* describes Arjuna's stress, and the rest of the story unfolds in the form of lessons in stress management for him, and for us – given by the greatest 'psychiatrist' there is. The question arises, what is stress, and how did it manifest in Arjuna?

What is stress?

One humorist has defined stress as: "The difference between the way the world is and the way you want it to be." A more formal and inclusive definition could be: "Stress is personal distress caused by stimuli interacting with our personal vulnerabilities."

Personal distress is the experience of uncomfortable and possibly painful symptoms suffered by the individual alone, and the evidence for this distress can be seen in the person's demeanour and actions. These perceivable symptoms are known as 'signs'. The signs and symptoms can be physical, mental, emotional or behavioural, and they are called 'stress responses'. The stimuli are the events and situations in our lives that set off the above reactions in us. They are called 'stressors'.

Then there are the vulnerabilities. Each one of us is vulnerable to different stressors according to the aspects of our unique personalities and constitutions.

Is stress all bad?

Stress can be beneficial, just as it was for Arjuna, because it can become an experience of learning life's lessons. Stress tells us that something is wrong in our lives, something is causing us to be vulnerable to the stressors that we experience.

Admittedly, severe or prolonged stress can be destructive because it takes a toll on the physical body, but manageable stress can be instructive, and there is no need to try to avoid it. Indeed, there is no way we can avoid it, for where there is life there are problems and the stress that goes with them. In addition, one can even enter luxurious isolation, but will still be carrying all the baggage of the mind that creates stress anywhere.

Richard Bach put it nicely in his little book *Illusions*. He wrote, "There is no such thing as a problem without a gift in its hand for you." He also added this valuable advice: "Don't turn away from possible futures before you're certain that you don't have anything to learn from them."

We can learn from stress. In fact, our stress experiences can be the most powerful of life's learning opportunities. Yoga can help us manage it and learn from it, and the whole of the *Bhagavad Gita* demonstrates this to us as well.

What are the typical stress responses?

As the definition indicated, stress is distress. It is feeling uncomfortable in the situation and it involves the whole person: physically, mentally, emotionally, and psychically. It affects the vitality, the behaviour, the social interactions and the spiritual awareness. Stress can produce effects at any and all of these different levels.

Physical effects of stress

Two physical manifestations of stress in the body are:

1. **The fright, fight or flight mechanism:** This can be acute or ongoing, chronic. This mechanism stimulates the sympathetic nervous system and the adrenal glands so that a rapid activation of the body's systems is produced. The

activation of these systems prepares the individual to either fight the enemy or run away. What is needed for both actions is plenty of oxygen to the brain and muscles. The heart rate increases so that the blood can flow more efficiently to the brain and muscles. The muscles then become tense and ready, which produces muscle tension and tremor. The breathing rate increases, and it can often increase so much that the person breathes too quickly and hyperventilates; basically the person ‘over-breathes’. This washes out the carbon dioxide and changes the acidity of the brain, causing the person to become dizzy or even faint. These physical manifestations of stress can be acute; they can arise at a certain moment as in Arjuna’s case, or they can go on for long periods of time and become chronic. Remember that some people who have ongoing stress have this muscular and breathing tension built into their bodies.

Thus, the typical physical symptoms of the stress response are: tense muscles, tremors, agitation, headaches, other aches and pains, arthritis, tight chest, typical posture and facial expressions of anxiety or anger, increased heart rate producing palpitations of the heart, increased blood pressure, which causes no direct symptoms until dangerously high, increased breathing rate and depth, and dizziness from reduced carbon dioxide.

As we know, and teach in Satyananda Yoga, the *asanas*, or yoga postures, are a very important way of releasing this tension from the body. It’s interesting to note that if one does yoga practices for only a single area of one’s being, such as postures for the physical body, the effects will be felt throughout all areas of that person. It will produce energetic effects, it will produce mental and emotional effects, and it will produce psychic effects.

Arjuna had many stress signs and symptoms. He said:

My limbs fail, my mouth is parched, my body quivers, my hair stands on end, the bow slips from my hand, my skin burns all over, I am unable even to stand, and my mind is reeling. (1:28–30)

Sounds like a suitable patient for the great psychiatrist, Sri Krishna.

2. Exhaustion: This is caused by the stress process going on too long. It can herald the onset of chronic disease in any organ system of the body, including the immune system which can lead to cancer and chronic infections, and the cardiovascular system which can lead to strokes, heart attacks, etc. At this stage, practising yoga becomes imperative if the person is to recover.

Mental and emotional effects of stress

This includes almost the whole gamut of psychological symptoms and disorders, especially the anxiety-tension states, depression, and addictions. Addictions can be to substances like alcohol, nicotine and various drugs, or to people and external objects. Once again, yoga is excellent for such conditions. Satyananda Yoga is what we call an integral system, in other words, it deals with all of the aspects of the person, including the mental, the emotional, the psychic and the spiritual, through different paths of yoga. All of the paths within this integral system can contribute to helping people who are stressed.

Stress is personal

The first point to emphasize is that stress is a personal thing. What causes stress for one person may not be important for another, and for a third person it might cause pleasant exhilaration. For instance, for some people, two hours spent in a discotheque may be incredibly stressful, whereas two hours spent giving lectures in front of thousands of people might be incredibly enjoyable. Others could spend all night in the disco, but may go into a wild panic simply at the thought of public speaking.

Of course there are certain extreme occurrences that would cause virtually anyone to experience stress. These are the horrible catastrophes, wartime experiences and other extreme civilian traumas to which we hope we are never

exposed. However, in the absence of such extreme mental traumas, general stress becomes a personal thing.

Why is stress personal?

Each of us feels stress through different stimuli because we are all vulnerable to different stimuli, and those vulnerabilities are unique to each one of us. Our vulnerabilities depend on those aspects of our personalities which are most affected by negative experiences, impressions and repressions.

Examples of vulnerabilities

We may examine our vulnerable triggers according to the qualities of those particular personality aspects in the following way:

1. **Insecurity:** Feeling insecure results from experiences in which the person's security was threatened in the past. Often the memories of the event are stored deep in the unconscious mind, and they need the yogic practices to bring them to the surface where they can be dealt with.

However, in the case of severe trauma, the memories may be quite conscious, and the insecurity results from a realization that one is indeed vulnerable to harm. This is commonly seen in people who have experienced or even witnessed community-based traumas such as assault, rape, motor accidents, etc. Until they were involved in them, they didn't even think of the danger; then after the event they wonder how they could ever have been so calm and complacent.

People who are basically insecure may have obvious mental and emotional symptoms such as anxiety, pessimism, insomnia, alcohol and drug abuse, and dependence on other things and people. They may also have the physical symptoms of the fight-or-flight mechanism, such as muscle tension, palpitations, tight chest, rapid breathing, indigestion, etc. Their attitudes and behaviour will also be affected; they may have retentive personalities, like the so-called 'anal retentive

personality' described by Freud, as they try to assuage their insecurity by hoarding possessions, money and so forth. Needless to say, no matter how much they collect it is never enough, and when they have plenty of money and possessions they worry even more about losing them.

The stressors to which insecure people are most sensitive are threats in their environment. They have selective perception for any possible threat; they can often see threats where threats don't even exist, and certainly quickly perceive the ones that do exist. This was demonstrated by psychologist Arne Ohman of Sweden. Dr Ohman showed people seemingly neutral pictures of flowers, mushrooms, and so on, but which had pictures of spiders and snakes embedded within them. The people who had previously confessed to a fear of spiders and snakes spotted them earlier and reacted faster than the ones who didn't care about them, many of whom didn't even see them at all. Obviously the greatest stressors for insecure people are potential sources of harm, loss of their possessions, or loss of a person on whom they are dependent.

Usually the people who don't have the mental impressions, *samskaras*, of threat just feel basically secure. Even though they may have very little, they are happy with their simple life and don't yearn for more. They can be around people and trust them without feeling insecure, and they can care for their possessions without being attached to them.

2. Power, dynamic action, and self-esteem: Once again we have people at two ends of the scale. There are those who are very power-orientated, needing to control every situation, are bossy and usually workaholic. They often appear to have a high self-esteem, but this often hides a deeper feeling of inadequacy which is their greatest vulnerability. The most stressful situations in their lives are those where they lack empowerment.

Experiments have shown that within business companies, the people who face the most stress are the middle managers. The expectation was that the people at the top

having all the responsibility would experience the most stress, but this wasn't the case. The conclusion demonstrated that because top executives are empowered to make the decisions, their stress levels are much less than those of middle management, who still carry the stress of high responsibility yet do not have the same decision-making powers. Yoga helps these people by developing other personality aspects to balance the over-powering tendency. Especially important here is to develop love, for the power and control freaks have to learn that power is no more than getting things done, usually with the help of other people, and other people respond more to love than to bossiness and pushing.

At the other end of the scale are the people whose power ability is weak or blocked. They are timid, have low self-esteem and low vital energy, and are vulnerable to being pushed around by every power person in their world. Indeed, they seem to attract them, and often marry one, leading to a lifetime of stress. Yoga helps these people by energizing and unblocking their personal power, and they start to gain some mastery over their life. As one might imagine, their marriages then undergo some painful realignment too.

Love, at its highest level, is the selfless giving of love, compassion and encouragement to others. A person at this level is not vulnerable and is not stressed, because they have no expectation of receiving anything such as love and favours in return. They just give, as the flower gives off its perfume for all to enjoy. However, there are not many people who function at this level.

For most people, the giving of love demands more in return, and therein lies their vulnerability. It is even more so for the people who are of an emotional nature; their lives literally revolve around the giving and receiving of love. If they lose the one who supplies the love, or there is a threat that loss will happen, they are devastated. Yoga can help such people by teaching them to develop non-attachment, and

opening their hearts so that they can give love freely without expectation.

On the subject of losing a loved one, we must consider the process of mourning or bereavement. This is a process of working through the loss of someone or something, dear to the person. Crying is the centre-point of mourning. It should be encouraged; it should not be suppressed, either by a brave face or by tranquillizing drugs. The mourner should feel free to think about their life with the departed loved one, the good times, the bad times, the laughs, the cries, and to let out any emotion, be it grief, anger, fear or any other emotion. Setting aside time during the day for yoga nidra can help this process, especially if the visualizations involve the lost one, as they usually will.

Many people have difficulty giving and receiving love and encouragement. Either they have a poorly activated love quality, or their ability to love is blocked by experiences of rejected love and emotional hurts in the past. These people may be stressed by a lack of meaningful relationships, but more often they cause stress for other people by their 'heartlessness'. Yoga can help them, and the people around them, by getting rid of the unconscious blockages and activating anahata chakra: their love centre.

3. Sexual and joy-related vulnerabilities: These can occur at both extremes of sexuality. At one end of this scale are the people whose sexuality is so active in relation to the other aspects of their personality that they are obsessed with sex. It influences how they see their world; they have selective perception for all things sexual. They sexualize all contacts with people they encounter, seeing them as potential sexual partners, and they live a life of ongoing frustration when their desires are not satisfied. The great stressor in life for these types is the fear of losing a person who is sexually satisfying to them. This can be so extreme that they become paranoid, believing that the partner is having sex with everyone around the place and is losing interest in them. Yoga helps these people because it brings

up the energies of the other personality aspects and balances the extremes.

At the other end of the scale is the person whose sexuality and joy is blocked or under-energized. These people have low sexual vitality, dejection, pessimism, lack a sense of humour, and if extreme, they may have full-blown depression. They may be very dependent on the people around them, and their greatest vulnerability relates to the loss of any of those people. They are also threatened by being unable to meet the sexual desires of their partner. Of course if they are priests or monks, they may be quite content with their low libido, being able to devote their time to what they consider to be more useful pursuits than sexual relationships and producing babies. Yoga helps these people manage their repressions and low sexual energies by energizing and unblocking their swadhisthana chakra, bringing it up into balance with the other centres.

Lacking a sense of humour is a real problem in this world. Life is so much easier if we can laugh at the things that happen to us, and especially if we can laugh at ourselves in a kind way when we don't do things as they should be done, or do things that shouldn't be done. The world is a cruel place for people without a sense of humour, and indeed, others do seem to pick on them and make their life more of a misery.

4. Communication problems: This can produce stress in two ways: by having a lack of it or by having too much of it. Having a job to do without being given enough information to carry it out can create stress. Some organizations are badly hampered because their lines of communication are blocked, and this results in high stress levels for the people who work in them. The people most vulnerable to stress in this situation are those who need to be told what to do all the time, requiring a continual input of information. There can also be an excess of communication; some people live with a person who nags and criticizes, giving them plenty of communication, but often of the negative sort.

Intellect, wisdom and intuition are needed for accurate decision-making. People of poor intellect, concentration or memory are not able to efficiently make decisions because they don't have the capacity to do so. Intellectually developed people are able to do this as long as they have enough information, but they have a problem when the information is insufficient. This is when the gift of intuition developed by the yoga practices is valuable. Intuition is knowledge from a higher source. We just know a thing is right, or is going to happen, or we know the solution to a problem without using the logic of the intellect.

Understanding our vulnerabilities

Not only do we have these vulnerabilities within us, but interestingly enough, life always seems to serve up the sort of situations that stimulate and interact with these vulnerabilities. Consider this in relation to your own life for a moment.

How do we attract them? It appears to be almost magnetic. What is required in the long run is to access the mind and find out what these things are. What are my vulnerabilities? How can I do something about them?

This is where yoga becomes pre-eminent again, because meditation allows us to get inside our minds and find out what's going on. Sri Krishna gives Arjuna instructions on meditation in the *Bhagavad Gita*. So, knowing that the stress triggers in our environment will be anything that interacts with the vulnerable points within us, how do we get the idea of what these personal vulnerabilities are?

Simply ask yourself the following questions: Where are the problem areas in my life? Are they of past experience, or even present experience? What's bugging me? What causes me stress? You might answer, "Those horrible people out there." That's the usual response. Perhaps it is someone or some people out there triggering you, but what are they doing? How are they impinging on you? They are pressing your buttons. Which of your buttons

are they pressing? Is it your insecurity regarding physical possessions and possessiveness in other ways? Is it about the vulnerability of your power and assertiveness? Maybe it is about fear of losing the love of another person, or about your sexual vulnerability, or of losing someone with whom you communicate. Is it having to do something, and believing you don't have enough information, intelligence or knowledge to do it? Maybe it is the expectation you have about the world out there, and the world is not doing what you want. Or is it that you have drifted from your spiritual roots?

Karma yoga, about which Sri Krishna also instructs Arjuna, in its purest practice, is the vehicle through which we can most easily become aware of our vulnerabilities and what to do about them.

Even more interesting is that as soon as we work out a vulnerability and neutralize it, the situations that were troubling us seem to disappear, and the people who were 'pushing that particular button' either stop doing it or also disappear.

Arjuna's stressors

Then Arjuna saw, stationed there in both the armies, fathers and grandfathers, teachers, maternal uncles, brothers, sons, grandsons and friends too. (He saw) fathers-in-law and friends also in both the armies. Arjuna, seeing all those kinsmen thus standing arrayed, spoke this, sorrowfully, filled with deep pity. (1:26–27)

Those on the other side were not strangers, rather they were the people with whom he had lived all his young life in the royal court. Some of them had been his best friends, some of them mentors, and one was his esteemed guru, Drona. What is the symbolism of this? Some of the personality traits that we must overcome in order to be free are our fondly-held habits, opinions, attitudes, desires, dreams, relationships, and so forth.

A good illustration is the story where the doctor said, “You’ll have to stop smoking those cigarettes or they’ll kill you.” The man said, “Look doc, I’ve got twenty friends in this packet, they soothe me when I am tense, they are my company when I am lonely, and they are always here when I need them.” The cigarettes were simultaneously his friends and his enemies, both. Arjuna’s opponents were not just enemies; they were his relatives and closest associates.

Arjuna’s stress responses

Recall the stress responses of Arjuna mentioned earlier:

Seeing these my kinsmen, O Krishna, arrayed and eager to fight, my limbs fail and my mouth is parched, my body quivers and my hair stands on end. The Gandiva (his bow) slips from my hand, and also my skin burns all over; I am unable even to stand, and my mind is reeling as it were. (1:28–30)

What are these symptoms of dry mouth, tremor, hair standing on end, burning skin, physical unsteadiness and confused concentration? As discussed above, they are the typical physiological responses which we call ‘the fight or flight mechanism’, which is activated by a threatening situation resulting in fear, or the person being motivated to attack. The purpose of this physical state is to prepare the body to most efficiently attack the enemy or to run away.

Was Arjuna frightened when he saw the might of the opposing forces? Was fear the cause of his breakdown? It is most unlikely that this great warrior was frightened of fighting in the war; so maybe his reaction was preparation to fight. However, doesn’t he talk about ‘turning away from’ the battle in the next verse? It seems as though he had some fear, but it was most likely caused by his realization that this unusual war of family against family would alter the society for the worse. This is borne out by the following verses:

Though they, blinded by greed, do not see evil in the destruction of the family, or sin in being treacherous to friends, why should

not we, who clearly see evil in the destruction of the family, think about turning away from this sin, O Krishna? Eternal family traditions and codes of conduct are destroyed with the destruction of the family. (1:38–40)

In addition to this, his symptoms seem to say ‘fear’, but his words are those of grief, despondency and maybe even imminent depression:

Teachers, fathers, sons and also grandfathers, maternal uncles, fathers-in-law, grandsons, brothers-in-law and other relatives. I do not wish to kill these people, even though they wish to kill me, O Krishna, even for the sake of dominion over the three worlds; how much less for the sake of the earth? Therefore, we should not kill the sons of Dhritarashtra, our relatives; for how can we be happy by killing our own people? (1:34–37)

It is like the twenty friends in the cigarette packet, they are waiting there to kill you yet, if you are a keen smoker, you consider them your friends.

Arjuna continues in this vein for another fourteen verses until at the end of Chapter 1 we hear Sanjay saying to the king:

Having thus spoken in the midst of the battlefield, Arjuna, casting away his bow and arrow, sat down on the seat of the chariot with his mind overwhelmed with sorrow. (1:47)

Arjuna’s vulnerability

The vulnerability of Arjuna was confused identity; he identified too strongly with the love and kinship aspects of his personality. Arjuna was so identified with his relationships as a member of the extended family that he forgot his primary role as the commander of a force. In that role his duty was to ensure that the evildoers on the other side did not benefit from their ill-gotten gains. This meant that at the time he was blinded to his obligation to engage the enemy and conduct the war for the sake of the job at hand, without

emotion, and with the conviction that what he was doing was just and honourable.

Managing stress

Remember that throughout the entire *Bhagavad Gita*, although Sri Krishna is talking to Arjuna, he is also talking to us, and Arjuna's life-lessons are intended for us as well. As with Arjuna, when we are under stress and experiencing a stress response, we will be able to identify a stressor if we look closely. If we look even closer, we will be able to discover a vulnerability of which we were not even aware lying deep down within us. The lessons of the *Gita*, along with other yogic principles, can help us to manage the stresses in our life.

Yoga helps in all three aspects of stress: the stress response, stressors, and vulnerabilities. For example, most yogic practices can help relieve the disturbing symptoms of the stress responses, and the more yogic practices we know, the more capable we become to choose the right ones for the stress symptoms we experience. Secondly, the yogic lifestyle, such as that explained by Sri Krishna in the teachings of the *Gita*, helps to reduce the stressors in our lives. Thirdly, meditation practices, and karma yoga especially, give us insight into our areas of vulnerability.

2

Reincarnation

The teachings of the *Bhagavad Gita* begin in Chapter 2, with Sri Krishna's reply to Arjuna:

Then Krishna, as if smiling, addressed the following words to the sorrowing Arjuna, in the midst of the two armies: Arjuna, you grieve over those who should not be grieved for, and yet you speak like the learned; the wise do not sorrow over the dead or the living. (2:10–11)

'You speak like the learned' implies that what one is saying seems to make sense, but it is not wisdom. The wise do not grieve for the dead as they know that the spiritual essence of the person is immortal, so there is no such thing as death for the individual. Only the body dies, so why worry about these people?

The wise do not grieve for the living either, because with their expanded perspective, they realize that this life is only one lifetime of learning experience in many lives spanning aeons of time.

Sri Krishna went on to explain that the spiritual part of the person doesn't die, only the body dies.

There was never a time when I was not, nor when you or these kings were not. And even hereafter we shall not cease to be. (2:12)

Boyhood, youth and old age are attributed to the soul through this body, and in the same way it attains another body. The wise person does not get deluded about this. (2:13)

Here Sri Krishna is talking about transmigration of the soul after death and its reincarnation into a new body. If you do not believe in reincarnation, please don't skip this part, at least it may interest you to know why others do, so read on and see what it is about.

Spirit is indestructible

The physical body is transient, whereas the Spirit is eternal, the seers of the truth realize this. (2:16)

The only imperishable thing is that which pervades this universe; no one has the power to destroy this indestructible substance. (2:17)

But all these bodies pertaining to that imperishable, indefinable and eternal Spirit are going to perish anyway; therefore, Arjuna, fight. (2:18)

The only thing that is indestructible is the *Paramatma*, the Supreme Consciousness which is the totality of Spirit, and the *atma* or *atman*, that part of the Supreme which constitutes the individual spirit in each of us. We should add that the energy of the universe is also indestructible and enormously powerful; one cosmologist fancifully estimated that one cubic centimetre of the energy contained in space is powerful enough to light up New York City. Everything else, including the forms of these bodies, is destroyed and its substance recycled. Therefore, argued Sri Krishna, you should not be deterred from fighting and destroying the foe, because the destruction of the bodies of these people is inevitable anyway.

People who believe the Spirit is capable of killing, and those who believe it can be killed, are both ignorant, because in fact the Spirit neither kills, nor is killed. (2:19)

The Spirit is never born nor dies; nor does it come into being only after being born. Because it is unborn, eternal, everlasting and ancient; even though the body is slain, the Spirit is not. (2:20)

Arjuna, the person who knows this Spirit to be imperishable, eternal and free from birth and decay, how and whom will he cause to be killed, how and whom will he kill? (2:21)

These three verses are self-explanatory, but we should be clear about two words: ‘soul’ and ‘spirit’. Beyond verse 24, I will use these words to mean different aspects of the person. The teachings tell us that after the body dies, the person goes on. What aspect of the person goes on? Surely the spiritual essence, the atman, and also the karmas and samskaras (the jivatma) remain associated with it. If we use the word ‘soul’ to mean this combination of the above, we can use the word ‘spirit’ to mean just the atman alone. Swami Sivananda Saraswati of Rishikesh uses the word ‘self’ in this same context. ‘Spirit’ and ‘soul’ are the two words we will use from now on, in their individual contexts.

Reincarnation

Now Sri Krishna goes back to the subject of reincarnation, with a very nice analogy:

As a person shedding worn-out garments takes other new ones, likewise the embodied spirit, casting off worn-out bodies, enters into others which are new. (2:2)

At this point in our discussion, we can develop the subject of reincarnation. This is a very important concept, for belief or non-belief in reincarnation is a core belief of life. For instance, if a person believes that they go on after the body dies, and that they will continue to be responsible for the things they do in this life, they are likely to treat other people and their world much better than people who don’t. This makes the concept of reincarnation an important and fundamental life belief in any community. Add to that the belief that one will come back into a body in the next life to

experience the consequences, both happy and painful, of what we do in this life, and the person will be respectful of the needs and rights of other people and of the earth itself.

Why should we believe in reincarnation? The general agreement in Christianity and most areas of Islam seems to be that reincarnation does not occur. Many of the religions of the world deny that it happens; however, there is some mention of it in the New Testament of Christianity, such as John the Baptist being a reincarnation of a previous prophet Elijah. The following biblical verses taken from the New International Version of the New Testament could be interpreted in this way.

In Matthew 11:14 of the Bible, Jesus is recorded as saying to his disciples when they had been talking about John the Baptist: “And if you are willing, accept it, he himself is Elijah who was to come.” Later on the disciples asked him, “Why then do the teachers of the law say that Elijah must come first?” Jesus replied, “To be sure Elijah comes and restores all things. But I tell you Elijah has already come, and they did not recognize him, but have done to him everything they wished.” Then the disciples understood that He was talking to them of John the Baptist. (Matthew 17:10–13).

Do we have any evidence for reincarnation? There are two kinds of evidence on which we might base our belief: subjective evidence, what we have experienced ourselves; and objective evidence, what other people have ‘told’ us.

Subjective evidence of reincarnation

Many people who have had definite re-experiences of what seem to be previous lives are convinced it is real. If you have a clear experience, maybe in meditation, of a previous life, it is so real, and explains so much of what is happening karmically in this life, especially the situation you are in, and the people you are with, that you are likely to be convinced. There are many people who practise meditation and who have had just this experience; and it is so clear that it is like no other.

Objective evidence of reincarnation

A lot of research has been done in many parts of the world on this subject. Many books have been written about it, and they can be quite convincing. They often describe people going back to the place of their previous life and being familiar with the people and places in a way that would be impossible if they had not been there before.

There is one book I would recommend, especially to reincarnation sceptics, titled *Where Reincarnation and Biology Intersect* by Professor Ian Stevenson. He died in 2007 at the age of eighty-eight, but in earlier times had been Head of the Department of Psychiatry at the University of Virginia, Charlottesville, US. He carried out extensive research over many years on the reincarnation experiences of people all over the world and wrote at length on it. The financing of the investigation was from a private bequest, supervised by the university, and overseen by the Dean of the Faculty of Medicine, said to be a reincarnation sceptic, whose job it was to ensure that the research was authentic.

Stevenson especially investigated young children between the ages of three and eight who claimed to have been someone else in a previous life, and he collected hundreds of cases. The children were able to remember all sorts of details of the previous life which they could never have known in any other way. Examples of his evidence are as follows:

Memories: Stevenson took the children back to the town where they were supposed to have lived previously, and which they had not visited in this life. They recognized the people who had been with the deceased person, especially family and friends. They remembered names, including their own previous name, and the nicknames and personal secret pet names of others, intimate details of marriages and other ‘secret’ information. They remembered places and their names, buildings, and even recognized alterations that had been done in their ‘absence’.

One little boy said as he walked into a house for the ‘first’ time, “My bedroom has gone.” The family explained, “We

took that wall out after you died, to make a bigger room.” They recognized the personal items of the deceased person. I call this the ‘Dalai Lama Technique’, because the Tibetan monks recognize the child who will be the new Dalai Lama by having him identify personal items of the deceased Dalai Lama among a mass of irrelevant items. In the same way, Stevenson found that the child in each case was able to distinguish the personal items of their previous life from other randomly placed items that had not been theirs.

They remembered their previous occupation, position in life, and property they previously owned. Often they remembered how they died, and if another person was responsible, who did it. In one case, a child recognized his previous murderer in the crowd, raised the alarm, and the man confessed to the murder and was arrested.

Emotions: They had similar emotional tendencies as the deceased, such as fondness for previously loved ones, and hate and desire for revenge for people who had previously hurt them, their previous enemies, and especially anyone who had contributed to their death such as their killers.

Behaviour: Often they behaved in this life just like the person in the previous life, such as in their speech, posture, gait, clothing preferences, choice of friends, choice of games, and forms of address to ‘elders’. For instance, often the person who died was the senior member of the family, and when he reincarnated into the same family, even though only a child, he continued to address the present senior member as an inferior.

Gender changes: Stevenson found that about one in seven people had changed gender in that reincarnation, and virtually all of them in this life had the emotions, attitudes and behaviour of the opposite gender. The males had more feminine behaviour, and the females had more masculine behaviour. If this extends to sexual orientation and attraction, it may even be a possible explanation for homosexuality. It may also be an explanation for the mysterious condition known as Gender Identity Disorder,

in which people are convinced from an early age that they are 'trapped' in a body of the wrong gender. Many are so frustrated that they are not satisfied until they change their gender through a surgical procedure, known as a sex-change operation.

Dream by the new mother: One bizarre finding of Stevenson was that sometimes the mother of the new child had had an experience during her pregnancy of the 'soul' of the dead person coming to her – for instance in a dream – and announcing it will become her next child.

A new kind of evidence

Most of the above findings have been reported in other writings over the years, and insofar as they are good quality research, they support each other's claims for the reality of reincarnation. However, what makes this work stand apart is the interesting and original observations of Stevenson on birthmarks and birth deformities, and how they corresponded with marks and deformities in the deceased or how they died. Remember that as a psychiatrist, Stevenson was a medical doctor, and he frequently had access to autopsy records often having photographs or drawings of the deceased, many of which accurately described the condition of the corpse. So he had a clear picture of the marks and deformities of the deceased person.

Birthmarks: Many of the children were born with birthmarks, some still bleeding at birth. He found that port wine stains were often in the pattern of blood stains on the body of the deceased. Other birth marks were in the positions of bullet holes (small birthmarks where the bullet went in and large ones where it went out the other side). He shows photographs of the dead body of a man who had been a bandit in the previous life, and had been shot by police. He died with a bullet entry in the right lower neck, which exited through a large hole in the upper left skull. Not only did the 'new' child remember his previous life as the bandit and how the police had shot him, but he had birthmarks in exactly

those positions. Previous injuries and even tattoos were often accurately represented on the body of the 'new' child.

Another photograph is that of a young girl who has a birthmark forming a horizontal line around the back of her head. She remembered that in the previous life, someone hit her over the head with a blunt object and she seemingly suffered a depressed fracture of the skull. She was operated on to elevate the fracture, but later died. The incision for the operation in her previous life was in the same place as the birthmark in this life.

Experimental birthmarks are another area investigated by Stevenson. In some societies which firmly believe in reincarnation, they will make some kind of mark on the body of a newly deceased person, and they will check the newborn babies of the people in their group to see if there is evidence of that mark. Stevenson found a correlation in these as well.

Birth deformities: Either the victim of a crime or the perpetrator can be born with birth deformities. He found children with the same limbs missing, with cuts that were sometimes even bleeding at birth, and binding or constriction-type rings showing the form of the twists of a rope with which these people had been tied. The book contains photographs of many of these. Sometimes, as in the case of experimental birthmarks above, the family will make experimental birth defects by mutilating the corpse in some way, so that they can recognize it in a person born later.

Illnesses: Often the reincarnated person has the same illness or the same symptoms as the person who died, but they are usually milder, and the person usually outgrows them.

QUESTIONS ASKED AT THIS POINT

In relation to Stevenson's work on reincarnation, is there any reference to the time taken between lives in the body?

The cases Stevenson investigated covered a very short time. He did have some cases that claimed a gap of about fifty or

sixty years, but by that time all the people he could have questioned were dead, so he preferred to investigate the shorter-term ones. He did work with the longer ones, but he was dealing with a lot of hearsay evidence, without the personal encounters of the people involved. He tended to leave those in the 'non-proved' category. On average in his investigations, the children were four to five years old, and the time that had elapsed was only a few years. Sri Krishna puts it clearly in the following verse:

One who (has been an aspirant but who) has fallen from yoga obtains the higher worlds (heaven, etc.), to which individuals of meritorious deeds alone are entitled, and having resided there for countless years, takes birth in the house of the pious and wealthy. (6:41)

Presumably Stevenson's subjects had not been yoga aspirants, because none of them had been out of a body for more than a few years.

When the *Bhagavad Gita* speaks about heaven, is it the same as the heaven of the Christian church?

According to the law of karma, when the body has died, the soul will be associating with other souls of its level of spiritual evolvment. Therefore its personal environment will be one of a high level, or vice versa. So heaven is not a place; it is a level of consciousness and the experiences associated with that level. If a soul is at an evolved level of love, compassion, joy, wisdom, and so on, the souls with whom it associates will be at that level and the environment will be at that level; a heavenly existence indeed. If a soul is at a bestial level, hating, biting, hurting, and so on, it will be associating with and attracted to like souls, which sounds hellish.

Sri Krishna impressed this reality of reincarnation on Arjuna. This was important as Arjuna said, "I won't kill these people", yet it was his duty to kill them and deprive them of their dishonest gains. The first argument Sri Krishna used was the fact that in their essence they were immortal,

and that even if Arjuna killed their bodies, they would get new ones anyway, in just the same manner as they put on new clothes. He then went on to talk about the soul's indestructibility by physical means:

Weapons cannot cut it nor can fire burn it; water cannot wet it nor can wind dry it. Because this soul is incapable of being cut, it is proof against fire, impervious to water and undryable as well. This soul is eternal, omnipresent, immovable, constant and everlasting. (2:24)

Once again we see the word 'soul'. One of the differences in the various translations of the *Bhagavad Gita* is the word used for the element of the person that goes on after the body dies. The Gita Press version quoted here uses the word 'soul', Swami Sivananda and Swami Chinmayananda use the word 'Self', Ramananda Prasad uses the terms 'Spirit' (Atma), Ramacharaka even used the term 'Real Man'. So what is 'Soul', what is 'Self', what is 'Spirit'? What is 'that imperishable thing that pervades this universe'?

This can all be very confusing. For instance, in verse 24 above, the word 'soul' seems to be used twice to mean different things: the first meaning being the Spirit plus the samskaras and karmas of the individual, and the second being Spirit or Atman, untainted by the samskaras and karmas.

The confusion is increased by the variety of terms and viewpoints held by different philosophies of India, not to mention those within the viewpoints of other belief systems of the world. Generally, regarding the meaning of the three terms, we can say the following: the conscious substratum of the universe is the Supreme Consciousness or Supreme Spirit, the *Paramatma*; the 'centre' or core essence of the individual is the individual Spirit, *Atma* or *Atman*; and that what continues to exist after the body dies is the Spirit plus the unique collection of personal karmas, tendencies and memories, collectively known in Sanskrit as *jivatma*, and which I will take the liberty here of calling the 'soul'. From

here on we will use those three terms: Supreme Spirit, Spirit and soul, in the different contexts (note the capitalizations used to indicate the highest principle in both the universe and individual). Thus verses 24 and 25 would become:

The soul is incapable of being cut; it is proof against fire, impervious to water and undryable as well. The Spirit is eternal, omnipresent, immovable, constant and everlasting. (2:24)

This Spirit is unmanifest; it is unthinkable; and it is spoken of as immutable. Therefore, knowing this as such, you should not grieve. (2:25)

They will die anyway

Sri Krishna fires one argument after the other at Arjuna to convince him to fight; the second argument was that the people on the other side will die anyway, so why worry:

But Arjuna, if you should suppose this Spirit to be subject to constant birth and death, even then you should not grieve like this. (2:26)

Because in that case, death is certain for the born, and rebirth is inevitable for the dead. You should not, therefore, grieve over the inevitable. (2:27)

Of course, Arjuna's reply to this could be, "Yes, but they are not necessarily going to die at this time, they could have many decades of good life ahead of them." But remember that Sri Krishna's viewpoint is much more exalted than that; he is looking from the perspective of eternity. From that point of view, a lifetime is just an instant.

In Chapter 11 of the *Bhagavad Gita*, this is graphically illustrated. We are presented with a vision of the leaders of the other side being devoured by Sri Krishna as the Supreme Spirit, in the 'form' of 'the full-grown world-destroying Time, now engaged in destroying the worlds'. In that aspect Sri Krishna adds, "Even without you, none of the warriors arrayed in the hostile armies will live." (11:32)

Arjuna, before birth beings are not manifest to our human senses; at death they return to the unmanifest again. They are manifest only in the interval between birth and death. Why then lament for them? (2:28)

The soul dwelling in the bodies of all can never be slain; therefore, you should not mourn for anyone. (2:30)

What part of the person goes on after death of the body?

This frequently asked question is clearly answered here. Sri Krishna tells us that the Spirit takes the mind: all the memory impressions and reasoning ability, and the sensory abilities. So when one is between births, one has the full ability to see, hear, etc., the memories of all those past lives, and the mind has the ability to process the sensory input and the output of those memories.

The individual Spirit (Atman) in the body of living beings is the integral part of the Universal Spirit, or Consciousness. The individual Spirit associates with the six sensory faculties of perception including the mind, and activates them. (15:7)

Even as the wind wafts scents from their seat, so too this atman, which is the controller of the body, etc., taking the mind and the senses from the body which it leaves behind, forthwith migrates to the new body which it acquires. (15:8)

What happens after death for the aspirant who did not realize God?

Later on, Arjuna suddenly thinks of his inability to control his mind and his passions, and what that may mean after his body has died: what will become of him? So he anxiously asks Sri Krishna, "What happens after death if we have not controlled the passions?" Sri Krishna had previously been talking of exalted people who have attained oneness with God, and Arjuna has been thinking, "I'm not one of those, what's going to happen to me?"

Krishna, what becomes of the soul who, though endowed with faith, has not been able to subdue his passions, and whose mind is therefore diverted from yoga (at the time of death), and who thus fails to reach perfection in yoga (God-realization)? (6:37)

Having strayed from the path leading to God-realization and without anything to stand upon, is that person not lost like the dispersing cloud, deprived of both God-realization and heavenly enjoyment? (6:38)

Krishna, please slash this doubt of mine completely; for none other than You can be found, who can clear this doubt. (6:39)

Sri Krishna tells him he will be all right. He says:

There is no destruction, O Arjuna, for the one who tries to attain perfection either in this life or the hereafter. A person who strives for transcendence is never put to grief, my dear friend. (6:40)

The less-evolved, unsuccessful one is reborn in the house of the pious and prosperous after attaining heaven and living there for many years. (6:41)

The highly-evolved, unsuccessful one is born in a spiritually advanced family; though a birth like that is very difficult to obtain in this world. (6:42)

There, one regains the knowledge acquired in the previous life, and strives again to achieve perfection, O Arjuna. (6:43)

The most devoted of all is the one who lovingly remembers Me with faith, and whose mind is ever absorbed in Me. (6:47)

Sri Krishna encourages Arjuna to strive for the highest:

The yogi is superior to the ascetics, and is regarded as superior even to those versed in sacred lore. The yogi is also superior to those who perform action with some interested motive. Therefore, Arjuna, you must become a yogi. (6:46)

However, this doesn't mean that Arjuna can go away to a cave; it means he must become a true karma yogi by following his dharma as a soldier and a prince, but do it with his mind focused on the Supreme Spirit:

But the best of all yogis is the one who, full of faith, devoutly worships with mind completely focused on the Lord. (6:47)

What will I be thinking at death?

Sri Krishna tells us that it is important to be thinking the right things when one dies, because it determines our experience after death:

And whoever, leaving the body, goes forth remembering only Me (the Supreme Spirit) at the time of death, attains My Being; there is no doubt about this. (8:5)

Whoever at the end leaves the body, thinking of any being, goes to that being, because of his constant thought of that being. (8:6)

Therefore at all times remember only Me, and fight (the battle of life). With mind and intellect fixed on Me, you will certainly come only to Me. (8:7)

Here Sri Krishna tells us that whatever or whoever we have in mind at the time of death, we will associate with that after death. So at the time of death, will you be thinking of the Supreme Spirit or your spiritual master, or will you be obsessed with that 'nasty person' you hate? Apparently it's your choice, so you'd better choose wisely. Sri Krishna advises us that to ensure we choose the best, we should continuously think of the Supreme as we go about our 'battle of life', that way we are sure to be doing so at the time of death. He even tells us the best procedure to adopt at the time you are dying:

Having closed all the gates, confined the mind in the heart, and fixed the life-breath in the head, engaged in the practice of concentration, (8:12)

Uttering the one-syllabled Om – the Brahman – and remembering Me, the person who leaves the body this way attains the supreme goal. (8:13)

‘Closed all the gates’ implies having cut off one’s awareness from the input of sensations, a process known in yoga as *pratyahara*. ‘Confined the mind in the heart’ most likely means fixing the mind on noble thoughts and feelings such as love, compassion, kindness and devotion, and in the process blotting out negative thoughts and emotions. ‘Fixed the life-breath in the head’ is said by Swami Sivananda to mean: “The whole life breath is taken up and fixed at the crown of the head, *brahmarandhra*.” With the inhalation, one can imagine the breath moves up the body to that point.

Day and night of Brahma

Those people who know the day of Brahma which has a duration of a thousand yugas (ages) and the night which is also of a thousand yugas duration, they know day and night. (8:17)

This is amazing cosmology, the big picture of the universe. The four yugas are Kali, Dwapara, Treta and Krita, and a thousand of them is 4.320 billion years. Therefore a day and night of Brahma is 8.640 billion years, and it is interesting that recent scientific estimates put the age of the earth to be around 4.5 billion years old.

From the Unmanifest, all the manifest universe proceeds at the coming of the ‘day’. At the coming of the ‘night’ it dissolves back into the Unmanifest. (8:18)

According to these figures, a Big Bang is repeated every 8.640 billion years, indicating that there wasn’t just one Big Bang; rather, the expansion and contraction of the universe has been recurring over vast aeons of time.

This same multitude of beings, being born again and again, is dissolved helplessly into the Unmanifest at the coming of

the night, and they come forth again at the coming of the day. (8:19)

Is the implication here that we keep coming back again and again, that we have all been here before doing exactly as we are doing now? If so, where does this fit into the free-will argument?

But there exists, higher than this Unmanifest, another Unmanifest Eternal, which is not destroyed when all beings are destroyed. (8:20)

It is called the Unmanifest and Imperishable. They say that is the highest goal. They who reach It do not return (to this samsara). That is My highest abode (place or state). (8:21)

That highest Purusha, O Arjuna, is attainable by unswerving devotion to Him alone, within Whom all beings dwell, and by Whom all this is pervaded. (8:22)

What is the best time to die if we can choose?

Sri Krishna gives the following information to Arjuna:

Now I will tell you the times at which, departing from the body, the yogis will return or not return. (8:23)

Remember he is talking about the yogis here, and he has already defined a yogi as a person who is right at the top of spiritual evolution, and has the nature of sattwa. But the interesting thing is this:

Fire, light, daytime, the bright fortnight, the six months of the northern path of the sun, departing then (by these) people who know Brahman go to Brahman. (8:24)

Attaining to the lunar light by smoke, night-time, the dark fortnight also, the six months of the southern path of the sun, the yogi returns. (8:25)

In the Mahabharata war, Bhishma, the elder of the Kauravas, was mortally wounded, lying on a bed of arrows, but didn't allow himself to die until the sun was entering the northern hemisphere, starting at the time of the spring equinox.

Swami Chinmayananda says this is all symbolic, although traditional Indians, if they would rather not come back, do prefer to die during the summer period, in the daytime and during the bright fortnight of the moon, perhaps just in case it is not only symbolic. Interestingly, Swami Satyananda attained mahasamadhi at midnight on 5th December 2009, which in India of course is mid-winter. He always told us he wanted to come back as soon as possible in order to continue his work for other people.

From the symbolic point of view, Swami Chinmayananda says these are symbols in the Upanishads for the sacred path of one's life. They are also symbols for the secular aspect of our life, and even yogis right at the top of sattwa either spend their entire life with their whole mind fixed on God, or they are out in the world, working. We have become part of the Satyananda group who are in the world, working for his mission. Recently Swami Niranjanananda made a comment that agrees with that of Swami Satyananda. He said, "I don't want to die and not come back. While I can help people, I want to keep coming back to the world, then we can all go up together." So maybe this is what Swami Chinmayananda is suggesting, that the high yogis can choose to be one-minded on the sacred or on the secular, or maybe even both.

For these two paths of the world, the bright and the dark, are considered to be eternal. Proceeding by one of them, one reaches the supreme state from which there is no return; and proceeding by the other, one returns to the mortal world, i.e., becomes subject to birth and death once more. (8:26)

In recent times, the idea of reincarnation has become popular in the West, as it has been for millennia in the East. This may be because people are more inclined nowadays to

accept possibilities, or even their own experiences, instead of being fixed in dogmatic beliefs. Certainly it is the teaching of yoga and related fields that we do incarnate through many lives, learning and growing as we do, until we reach our highest potential which is oneness with the Supreme. It is a bitter-sweet journey, but one which we all must take, right from those individuals of the lowest level of awareness to those at the highest pinnacle of spiritual evolution.

3

Equanimity

Equanimity is the ability to remain mentally, emotionally and physically balanced in hot or cold, pleasure or pain, success or failure, praise or criticism, fame or disgrace, or other pairs of opposites in any positive or negative life situation. As Swami Niranjanananda wrote in *Yoga Darshan*, “If our mind becomes disturbed by failure and success, then we swing like a pendulum, from one side to the other: from a positive and optimistic approach during success, to a negative and pessimistic approach during failure. This swing of the mind from success to failure, and failure to success is very disturbing and distracting.” It certainly turns our efforts at karma yoga into failure.

Sri Krishna in the *Bhagavad Gita* describes the person with equanimity as:

Content with what comes to them without effort, free from the pairs of opposites and envy, even-minded in success and failure, though acting, that person is not bound. (4:22)

Nevertheless, it is difficult to maintain equanimity. We need to reduce and eventually abandon the desires for attachment, the desire for personal results, the desire for achievement, the desire for reputation, social position, status, money: all the things that stroke our ego. We also need to closely observe our expectations, and if we do we will discover a potent cause of our dissatisfaction. Sometimes it seems that life in this world is

a great conspiracy between God and the people around us to ensure that our expectations are not fulfilled, so that we are in an intermittent state of disappointment and resentment. What to do? Each of us can become the observer of our expectations, and realize just how irrational most of them are. For these reasons, in order to maintain the necessary mental balance, it is necessary for most of us to be practising the other yogas as well.

When Swami Satyananda was talking about equanimity, someone asked him, “Don’t yogis have the ups and downs of life like the rest of us?” He said, “Life has its ups and downs for everybody, but for the yogi every up is a joy, and every down is an adventure.”

The contacts between the senses and their objects, which give rise to the feelings of heat and cold, pleasure and pain, etc., are transitory and fleeting; therefore Arjuna, ignore them. (2:14)

Arjuna, the wise person to whom pain and pleasure are alike, and who is not tormented by these contacts, becomes eligible for immortality. (2:14)

Equanimity, balanced feelings in the face of favourable and unfavourable situations and occurrences, is a common theme in the *Bhagavad Gita*, and occurs all the way through. This is not surprising, because it is one of the fundamental principles of karma yoga. As Robert Schuller wrote, “Tough times don’t last; tough people do.” Even just remembering this can help our personal quest for equanimity.

Sri Krishna continues with a description of how we can attain union with the Supreme Spirit through equanimity and renunciation:

Endowed with equanimity, one sheds in this life both good and evil. Therefore, strive for the practice of this yoga of equanimity. Skill in action lies in (the practice of this) yoga. (2:50)

Because wise people, possessing an equipoised mind, renouncing the fruit of actions and freed from the shackles of birth, attain the blissful supreme state. (2:51)

When your mind has fully crossed the mire of delusion, you will then grow indifferent to the enjoyments of this world and the next, both those that have been heard of, as well as to those that are yet to be heard of. (2:52)

When your intellect, confused by hearing conflicting statements, will rest steadily and undistractedly (in meditation) on God, you will then attain yoga (for lasting union with God). (2:53)

Now we are told by Sri Krishna that one of the keys to equanimity is non-attachment. After all, if one is not emotionally attached to the things of the world, one will not be emotionally unbalanced when the world deprives one of them, or takes them back when one has them. It is not just objects and people in our life that we must release from our emotional bonds, it includes our valued opinions, convictions, biases, bigotries and other precious overvalued ideas. The following quotes from different parts of the *Bhagavad Gita* emphasize the importance of balance amidst the pairs of opposites:

One who is unattached to everything, and meeting with good and evil neither rejoices nor recoils, his mind is stable. (2:57)

Resting in Brahman, with steady intellect and undeluded, the knower of Brahman neither rejoices on obtaining what is pleasant nor grieves on obtaining what is unpleasant. (5:20)

The Supreme Self of the one who is self-controlled and peaceful is balanced in cold and heat, pleasure and pain, as also in honour and dishonour. (6:7)

One who remains the same towards friend or foe, in honour or disgrace, in heat or cold, in pleasure or pain; who is free from attachment; who is indifferent to censure or praise, quiet, content with whatever one has, unattached to a place (a country, or a house), calm, and full of devotion – that person is dear to Me. (12:18–19)

However, if we look at the quotes above, we will see that they apply to the person who already has a mind that is quietened

by equanimity and concentrated on the Divine. The *Gita* has many stanzas like these, telling us of the glorious experience of the enlightened person who is one with God, but the question that arises is, “WHAT ABOUT ME? It’s nice to hear about these wonderful people, but I am nowhere near that; how do I develop equanimity and peace of mind?” Arjuna asks that question for us in response to thirteen stanzas that begin with:

As a flame does not flicker in a windless place, such is stated to be the picture of the disciplined mind of the yogi practising meditation on God. (6:19)

The state in which the mind becomes still, curbed through the practice of yoga, and in which, realizing God through subtle reason (purified by meditation on God) the soul rejoices only in God. (6:20)

Arjuna confesses:

This yoga of equanimity taught by you, Krishna, I can’t continue it steadily, because of the restlessness (of my mind). (6:33)

The mind really is restless, turbulent, strong and unyielding, Krishna, I believe it is as difficult to control as the wind. (6:34)

Sri Krishna says, just as Sage Patanjali does in his *Yoga Sutras*:

The mind is restless no doubt, and difficult to curb, Arjuna; but it can be brought under control by abhyasa (repeated practice), and by the exercise of vairagya (dispassion). (6:35)

It is difficult for the person whose mind is not subdued to achieve yoga, but one who has the mind under control, and is ceaselessly striving, can attain it. (6:36)

Thus the path to equanimity and peace of mind is sustained hard work in the yoga practices, which certainly includes karma yoga, and trying to be unattached to the things of this body and of the world.

How do we start? What are the steps we ordinary people need take to accomplish this state of being? The answers

are given to us throughout the *Bhagavad Gita*, and fortunately they are outlined for us in the book *Samatvam – The Yoga of Equanimity* (Yoga Publications Trust, Munger, Bihar, India).

Swami Satyananda introduces this with a delightful analogy: “To attain equanimity of mind, sages and thinkers through the ages have been telling us to live in this world like the tongue lives amongst a set of thirty-two teeth. How perilous is its condition; at any moment the tongue can be bitten to pieces, but despite this, it manages to remain unharmed. Similarly, human beings should be as dexterous as the tongue and learn to live in the midst of life’s struggles without being affected; to face all the ups and downs, hopes and despairs, without being tainted.

“Not allowing the mind to be affected negatively by the contradictions of life is the yoga of equanimity. Contradiction is the law of life, progress and mobility. There is contradiction everywhere in creation; there is no uniform philosophy in life. If there were no contradictions or adverse situations, there would be no progress or evolution. The very fact of existence itself is a contradiction. Therefore, rather than worrying about the various contradictions in our life, whether emotional, mental or intellectual, we need to find a way of accepting contradictions and conflicts, and still remain harmonious and balanced.”

So what are the ways Swami Satyananda recommended for us to do this?

Have a goal and a philosophy in life

“If people know and somehow experience that life has a spiritual purpose, and they have a goal and a philosophy of a divine life to live by so as to attain that purpose, then all will be well. One must be involved in life, but at the same time one must develop a deeper, higher, more perpetual, enduring and abiding awareness.”

The more we can be at one with this ‘big picture’ of what life and existence are all about, the less important will seem

the day-to-day irritants that disturb our equanimity. Swami Satyananda went on to say: “As far as total cosmic existence is concerned, a spiritual aspirant (that is all of us) has only one destination: self-realization. When you realize that this is the purpose of your human incarnation, you will become a sincere seeker of eternal peace, and you will work to become liberated from the endless cycle of karma.”

Have patience

“To achieve the state of equanimity, try to integrate and harmonize both the internal and external elements of life. To do this there is actually nothing to give up, nothing to reject. As you evolve, many habits, addictions and experiences are left behind. As you grow older, your hair goes grey and your teeth fall out; it is a natural process. In the same way, what we call the sensualities of life, the infirmities of willpower, the habits and weaknesses will all fall away one by one by themselves, without you having to do anything.

“We are all subject to the laws of universal or cosmic nature, and according to those laws we have a certain type of personality, a certain way of thinking, a certain kind of conviction, and certain types of strengths and weaknesses from time to time. But we should not worry about it or try to get out of it. We should wait. We must have patience; and if we have patience we will find that in the course of time, like a snake, those scales will be thrown off automatically or will eventually drop away, because habits and addictions are transitory. All the thoughts that go through the mind are impermanent; they keep flowing like a flowing river.”

Be regular in sadhana

“First, have respect for your lifestyle and personality, and second be regular with your *sadhana*, yogic practices, at any cost! Every day without fail, with absolute regularity, devote a minimum of ten minutes to your yoga practice so as to connect with your inner nature; that place of stillness, silence and peace within.

“It is very difficult to maintain regularity in spiritual practice, but for ten minutes a day, sit calmly and quietly, with the body absolutely still, with eyes closed, and gaze inward, either at the nose tip, the mid-eyebrow centre, the heart centre or the navel centre. Fix your inner gaze at one of these points. You can practise your mantra, meditation on a form or symbol, concentration on the breath, or on the light at the mid-eyebrow centre, on your symbol in the heart or in the navel centre, or whatever point you have chosen for this practice. If you have time, practise more. Whatever you practise, however, remember that regularity is of the greatest importance. It is not the quantum of practice, but regularity that will ultimately give inner peace and equanimity of mind.

“Continually analyze yourself to see how the knocks of life are affecting your inner state of mind, the divine quality within you. An aspirant’s life must be of such nobility, and so fulfilling, that the onslaughts, tremors and shocks from family, friends and enemies just do not affect him.”

Non-identification

“The mind must be strengthened so that adverse outside events no longer disturb its functioning. Most people are like fragile glass balls; they crack, shatter and go to pieces every time they are bounced by a difficult situation. In life one must become like a rubber ball. If you throw a rubber ball on the ground it will rebound without any detrimental change to its inner composition. You must be like this rubber ball: resilient, yet strong, flexible in all situations, and not allowing the upheavals of life to touch the inner core of your being. This is easier said than done, but the method of watching situations as though they are something apart from you is a great aid to gaining inner stability.

“As much as possible, try not to identify with your body, emotions and mind. Detachment is an excellent method to bring this about. Although you act out and react to external roles, activities and feelings of love, hate and anger, they should be seen as something outside yourself. They should

not be allowed to affect you in a deeper sense. You must be aware of them as though you are a witness.”

This ability to be the *drashta* or *sakshi*, the witness, meaning to be able to observe without becoming emotionally involved, protects us from getting entangled in the ‘dramas’ around us. At the same time it allows us to make better decisions in any crises that come our way. It is the necessary skill for experiencing equanimity, because if we are not able to mentally ‘stand back’ and objectively see a situation, we cannot keep our emotions from bursting forth. In perfecting the witness position, it is usually easier to begin by developing our ability to witness outside events, and then gradually we start to become the witness to our own inner events such as thoughts, attitudes, emotions and body identification.

Inner and outer harmony

“Both in the past and in the present, human beings have devoted most of their attention to mastering outer events, caring little for inner events. There has to be progressive movement towards harmony in both the external and internal worlds. Internal problems must be progressively erased from the subconscious mind, and there are a large number of techniques for clearing out the mind and inducing tranquillity.

“The experiences of dis-identification from body, mind and emotions by becoming the witness, the ‘I’, will hasten this process until the accumulated dust of past conditionings and impediments is wiped from the mind. Then you will know what Christ meant when he talked about ‘the peace that surpasses all understanding’.”

Striving for steadiness of mind

“It is accepted that karma yoga, bhakti yoga, raja yoga, jnana yoga, hatha yoga, laya yoga, mantra yoga, kriya yoga and other yogas purify the consciousness. Yet how can imbalances of mind, body, intellect and psyche, how can disappointment

and a completely broken heart be the means for evolution of the inner consciousness? For that is the primary hypothesis of the *Bhagavad Gita*, one of the most important spiritual texts given to humankind.

“Yoga begins at the moment one is facing calamities, when one is in total darkness and yet is trying to manage oneself. The *Bhagavad Gita* contends that yoga begins when you are facing great disappointments, when you are totally disillusioned with life, when you are at the breaking point, when you are depressed and facing a nervous breakdown, when your mind is full of conflict and you are being pulled from both sides, when tears flow from your eyes, when your heart is full of agony and anguish, when you do not know what to do, when you become angry and want to run away or commit suicide, when you know the truth but cannot accept it.”

What do you do at such a time? Many people surrender completely to such difficult situations and give up, but most try to maintain their balance and find a positive solution. This attempt to overcome such a situation (like the one Arjuna finds himself in at the beginning of the *Bhagavad Gita*) is the beginning of yoga, defined by Sri Krishna as *samatvam yoga*, the yoga of equanimity.

“Once we take birth in this physical body, we are subject to the laws of nature. We cannot get away from it despite our struggles to do so. *Maya*, illusion, and *avidya*, ignorance, follow a person like a shadow throughout his life, and sometimes overpower him. However, the human birth which has been ordained to us is not a punishment, but a chance, an opportunity given to evolve and attain enlightenment.

“Everyone faces this balancing act amidst the mundane activities of life. It is striving for steadiness of mind, a sense that there must be something more to life. It is the primary and preliminary step into the yoga of equanimity.”

Live life fully

“Participate in all events externally, but internally maintain an attitude of non-doership. Remember there are not one,

but many levels of experience. In each level you have what appear to be real experiences, but when you transcend that level, then those experiences have no validity. Seemingly valid and real experiences that balance or unbalance the mind are just those with which the mind identifies, nothing more.

“Every situation that comes into your life is meant to change you and accelerate your evolution, which means that internally you will have to do a lot of overhauling. All the changes are taking place within you, not outside. Of course it does not happen overnight; it is a gradual process over thousands of lifetimes. Nevertheless, try to understand that every element of life is a part of yoga, part of a process of purification to exhaust the dross, density and thickness of karma, and eventually achieve a state of absolute equilibrium.”

Balance between extroversion and introversion

“Many people with spiritual aspirations are faced with a dilemma; whether to live in the world of action or devote all their time to the practice of meditational techniques. The *Ishavasya Upanishad*, and the *Bhagavad Gita*, give a clear answer: both must be done simultaneously.”

The *Ishavasya Upanishad* emphasizes this important point:

That which is known through doing only external actions, is different from that which is known through introversion. Thus it has been said by the wise. (v. 10)

Total concern with the outside world leads only to intellectual knowledge, not intuitive knowledge. Only by understanding the internal sphere of existence will you be able to bring about deeper understanding of the material world in which you live. Higher states of awareness can only occur when there is perfect balance both in the inner and outer worlds.

People who have a tendency to reject the so-called mundane worldly activities as irrelevant to their spiritual

evolution are likely to have many unresolved problems. Rejection of the world does not remove personality problems; they merely lie dormant in the mind, acting as obstacles to success in meditation practices.

However, such a balance can be difficult for some people who are strongly extroverted or strongly introverted, and who may also have the related imbalance in optimism and pessimism. Such people may have an imbalance in the activity of their cerebral hemispheres. We now know that those people having a predominance of activity in the left hemisphere tend to be extroverted and optimistic, and that those people having a predominance of the right hemisphere tend to be introverted and pessimistic. We also know that a predominance of airflow through the right nostril activates the left hemisphere, which makes the person extroverted, and that a predominance of left nostril airflow activates the right hemisphere, making the person introverted. In addition to that, the yogis have recommended certain yogic techniques which balance the flow of air through the nostrils, such as the practice of *neti* (pouring warm salty water through each nostril), and various alternate nostril breathing techniques.

Thus, in addition to the meditational techniques, yoga also offers physical techniques to help us remain in balance and develop our equanimity. However, it must be mentioned that no book can replace the expert guidance of a qualified instructor. These practices and techniques must be learnt under competent guidance, such as the many accredited Satyananda Yoga teachers worldwide, as the practices are both subtle and powerful.

The results of these few techniques from within the vast field of yoga, are in themselves proof of the advantages that an extensive, living body of teachings and practices can bring to humanity.

4

Dharma

Sri Krishna says to Arjuna: “Arjuna, it is your life’s duty to fight this war.” Sri Krishna’s third argument to induce Arjuna to fight the war is that of dharma. What is dharma? It is a complicated concept that has been given many meanings by many authorities, at all levels and in many religions. We will discuss some other aspects of dharma later in this chapter, but here we are dealing with Arjuna’s personal dharma, his *swadharma*. We may define this aspect of dharma as it applies to Arjuna or anyone as ‘the most appropriate direction or course for each of us in life and the duties associated with that life course, according to the qualities of our own personal inner nature constitution and aptitudes’.

Dharma: life’s purpose

Swami Satyananda gave a short but pregnant definition: “Dharma is your life purpose.” You brought into this life your unique personal qualities through which you are evolving to your next stage of development.

Now Sri Krishna says to Arjuna, regarding his desire to walk away from the war:

Besides, considering your own duty too, you should not waver, for there is nothing more welcome for a person of the warrior class (kshatriya) than a righteous war. (2:31)

Arjuna, happy are the kshatriyas who get such an unsolicited opportunity for war, which opens the door to heaven. (2:32)

But if you refuse to fight this righteous war, then, shirking your duty and losing your reputation, you will incur sin. (2:33)

Arjuna is a *kshatriya*, a member of the warrior class, so Sri Krishna is saying, “You are a soldier. What is your job? It is to win a righteous war, even by killing people if necessary.” Arjuna is not a doctor, whose job it is to save people’s lives, or a mother whose job it is to give birth to new lives and nurture them; those people have different personal dharmas. Sri Krishna told him that he shouldn’t waver, because there is nothing more welcome for a man of the warrior class than a righteous war. Remember, Arjuna was the principal warrior of the righteous side. Everything unrighteous was performed by the principal people on the other side, acts such as lying, cheating and indulging in greed, robbing the Pandavas of their birthright and subjecting them, and especially their wife Draupadi, to gross indignities.

In the third chapter, on the same topic of dharma, Sri Krishna goes even further into one of the most controversial verses of the *Bhagavad Gita*. Remember that we have defined this complicated concept of dharma in this context simply as ‘the most appropriate direction for each of us in life, and the duties associated with that life course, according to the qualities of our own personal inner nature constitution and aptitudes’. Now Sri Krishna adds:

One’s own dharma, though devoid of merit, is preferable to the dharma of another well performed. Even death in the performance of one’s own dharma brings blessedness; another’s dharma is fraught with fear. (Causes stress by suppressing one’s natural expression of personality.) (3:35)

Sri Krishna repeats this idea in Chapter 18, but not as forcefully:

Better is one's own duty (though) destitute of merits, than the duty of another person well performed. One who does the duty ordained by one's own nature incurs no sin. (18:47)

It is better to perform your own dharma, even though you don't do it well, than to attempt to perform the dharma of another. It is even blessed to die in the performance of one's own dharma, whereas trying to perform another person's dharma only causes trouble. Of course this is especially relevant to Arjuna, because as a soldier, he is quite at risk of dying in the performance of his duty. For most of us this likelihood is not nearly so great; practising as a medical doctor doesn't have a very high mortality rate nowadays, although it did in the old days of the plagues.

If you don't fight, you shall be shamed

Now Sri Krishna appeals to Arjuna's ego by reminding him of the damage to his high reputation if he leaves the battlefield. Due to his obvious dharma, and his excellent reputation gained from his past skills as a warrior, other people have high expectations of him too:

People will pour undying infamy on you; and infamy brought on a person enjoying popular esteem is worse than death. (2:34)

And the warrior chiefs who thought highly of you, will now despise you, thinking that it was fear that drove you from battle. (2:35)

And your enemies, disparaging your might, will speak many unbecoming words; what can be more distressing than this? (2:36)

Sri Krishna's next argument is that Arjuna can't lose anyway because as a warrior, if he is killed in the pursuit of his dharma he will go to heaven, if he is victorious he will gain the kingdoms of the earth.

Die, and you will win heaven; conquer, and you enjoy sovereignty of the earth; therefore, stand up Arjuna, determined to fight. (2:37)

Now Krishna comes back to the subject of equanimity. He tells Arjuna to not just go in there and fight, but to do it with a neutral, non-egocentric attitude irrespective of the way the battle is going, and to do it for the sake of the battle itself.

Treating alike victory and defeat, gain and loss, pleasure and pain, engage in the battle for the sake of the battle, fighting like this you will not incur sin. (2:38)

Dharma in general

There is another more general aspect to personal dharma, which is our obligation to society and other people to conduct ourselves in a moral and ethical way, and to pursue the right way of living. Of course morals, ethics and right living can vary from society to society, and from time to time, but according to the yogic teaching there is a system of dharma that applies irrespective of the society or the time. This is called *sanatana dharma*: the eternal dharma. Swami Niranjanananda puts this clearly: “There are two kinds of dharma. One is *yuga dharma*, which is changing all the time. The values of society and the world in general are in constant flux. The other is known as *sanatana dharma*, the eternal law, which controls the whole universe. We make the mistake of trying to become aware of the eternal laws and the concept of *sanatana dharma* without fully realizing and understanding *yuga dharma*, our present duty and obligations, so a misunderstanding takes place in our own belief of what dharma is.”

Frequently, the social dharmas can overrule one's personal dharma. For instance, in the year 1942, Australia was attacked from the north by a military force intent on taking over the country. Every able-bodied man volunteered or was conscripted to go up there to try to stop them, which they did. Those people were not natural warriors, they were bank clerks, artists, poets, actors, people from all walks of life, but in that hour of need they went willingly and found the bravery within them to do the job. That is a typical

example of yuga dharma; it was just that time and place that required them to forego their natural dharma and become warriors. When the survivors came home, most of them went back to their usual work and lifestyle or something similar.

Another example of yuga dharma is the difference in the duties that are required of a doctor nowadays. In previous times, there were few diagnostic facilities or treatment modalities, but now they are quite extensive, and a doctor owes it as a duty to his or her patients to have good knowledge of them.

Not only do individuals have personal dharma, but social groups do, too. A typical example is emphasized by Sri Krishna when he reminds Arjuna that he has dharmic obligations as a kshatriya, a member of the warrior class. Whole societies can have a dharma related to their obligations to other societies and to the rest of the world in general. In the same way, human society has a dharmic obligation to care for this planet on which we are all living. However, Sri Krishna's teaching to Arjuna is very much on the subject of his personal dharmic obligations as a warrior (and by implication, our dharmic duties as well), and the necessity to lead his side in the Mahabharata war.

How does one's personal dharma develop?

Each of us is born with a unique personality as a result of our experiences, memories, thoughts, emotions and responses to others during many previous lives, the individual genetic make-up of the body we have in this life, the influence of our time in the womb, and the birth experience itself. This has been modified by the experiences and actions of this life so far, and the aptitudes and skills we have brought with us and developed during this lifetime.

The sum of these conditions has resulted in an individual character that is predominant in either one of four natures: dynamic, intellectual, emotional, or psychic, and these tendencies form the substrata of each person's dharma. According to these qualities, each of us will have a natural

tendency to pursue an appropriate course of life, and to perform the duties necessary for living that life. This is clearly exemplified by the so-called ‘caste system’ of India and its four principle social groups known as *varnas*: the brahmins, kshatriyas, vaishyas and shudras.

The four varnas

Sri Krishna says:

The four orders of society (viz., brahmin, kshatriya, vaishya and the shudra) were created by Me, classifying them according to the differentiation of guna and karma predominant in each and apportioning corresponding duties to them. (4:13)

In Chapter 18, Sri Krishna deals with this in detail. Remember that these groups represent the divisions of labour in the community and are based on one’s predominant abilities, aptitudes and personality styles; in other words, on their personal dharma, *swadharma*.

1. *Brahmin*: priests, scholars, teachers, philosophers, and some professionals such as doctors and lawyers.
2. *Kshatriya* (to which Arjuna belonged): warriors, leaders, kings, princes, generals, and even foot soldiers if soldiering is a natural thing for them. In modern society they are those people as well as the police, administrators and politicians.
3. *Vaishya*: farmers, producers and business people in general (participating in *honest trade* as Sri Krishna points out).
4. *Shudra*: labourers and servants.

Sri Krishna now goes on to elaborate on this principle:

Of brahmins, kshatriyas and vaishyas, as also of shudras, O Arjuna, the duties are distributed according to the qualities born of their own nature. (18:41)

Whether a person fits into one or another of these groups depends on many qualities of the person. Some of these are:

- The quality of the person's ego: shy, modest, proud, conceited, arrogant, etc.
- The type and amount of the person's knowledge and aptitudes: philosophical, action-oriented, good with money, handcrafts, etc.
- The texture of his or her understanding: wide viewpoint of life, limited, narrow, etc.
- The quality of the person's emotions and feelings: happy, loving, optimistic, pessimistic, angry, vengeful, etc.
- The temper of the person's fortitude: fixed, stubborn, vacillating, inconsistent, courageous, reticent, etc.
- The person's actions and speech: the type, refinement and quality, etc.

For this system to work properly as it did in the bygone ages, we must assess these qualities within the person, not the family from which the person comes, and not according to their skin colour or other unrelated characteristics. Over recent centuries many cultures have lost this egalitarian standard, and as a result they have ossified into rigidly-layered societies based on family ties, tribal favouritism and financial influence. Thus they have stagnated due to lack of new blood and fresh ideas entering the decision-making levels.

Possibly the best societies nowadays, ones in which the system is working well, are some of the affluent social democracies – the true democracies and not those which are actually dictatorships – where the only limitation is one's own ability and aptitude to follow swadharma. A typical example of this is Australia. In this country there are no social ceilings, and a person from a low socio-economic family can reach any level of society in his or her most appropriate occupation as long as he or she has the necessary abilities and works hard. The family they came from doesn't matter, whether Smith, Gupta, Chang, Polski, O'Brien, Orloff, McTavish, Mohamed, or any other.

This may not sound like the varna system, as it is not named as such, but most people in these democratic societies

are holding occupations because they are appropriate to their swadharma, and they are fully aware of their duties and obligations. Of course, it is helpful if the society is affluent and has a small population like that of present-day Australia and India of the past. However, we should remember that family succession may not be attributed to nepotism only. It may be appropriate that people from the same family follow a similar direction in life, because reincarnation and karma may have directed a person into an appropriate family or ethnic group in this incarnation so that their natural dharmic qualities developed thus far can express themselves and continue to develop.

How does Sri Krishna describe the qualities of the people in these groups?

Serenity, self-restraint, austerity, purity, forgiveness and also uprightness, knowledge, realization and belief in God are the duties of the brahmins, born of (their own) nature. (18:42)

Prowess, splendour, firmness, dexterity and also not fleeing from battle, generosity and lordliness are the duties of the kshatriyas, born of (their own) nature. (18:43)

Agriculture, cattle-rearing and honest trade are the duties of the vaishyas, born of (their own) nature. Action consisting of service is the duty of the shudras, born of (their own) nature. (18:44)

This was never a fixed system whereby the members of the family automatically took on the typical dharma of the family as is happening nowadays. However, there are some groups where life will be better and easier than others, so the parents, wanting the best for their children, will facilitate their following the family line even if it is not their dharma.

Such nepotism has been the rule in the ‘upper’ groups, and this especially applies to the top of the social ladder where royalty is typically hereditary. This has resulted in some good kings and emperors over time, but also in some

terrible rulers who would not have been appointed or voted in through a true democratic system of appropriateness or merit, such as that which we have in some countries today.

In the true varna system, we become part of one of these groups, not because of who our father was, but because of the qualities within us. These qualities are physical, constitutional, intellectual, aptitudinal, mental, emotional, behavioural, karmic, etc., and have developed from the karmas of our past lives, our genetic inheritance, our development in the womb, maybe even the moment of our birth, or astrological qualities, and our experiences in this life. According to these, each of us will naturally be appropriate in one of these four orders of society.

Each person who devotes themselves to their own duty attains perfection. How they attain perfection while being engaged in their own duty, hear now. (18:45)

Sri Krishna went on to explain that it doesn't matter what job you are doing, if you do it in the spirit of karma yoga you will evolve. This is one of the fundamental principles of the *Bhagavad Gita*.

The person attains perfection by worshipping, with his own duty, Him from whom all the beings have evolved and by whom all this is pervaded. (18:46)

This is karma yoga, the surrendering of all activities to the higher power. We must do it in the context of our own personal dharma and the duties that come of it; and it must be done in a manner of renunciation and self-control of mind and desires:

The person whose mind is always free from selfish attachment, who has subdued the mind and senses, and who is free from desires (no matter what work they do), attains the supreme perfection of freedom from the bondage of karma by renouncing selfish attachment to the fruits of work. (18:49)

How do we accomplish freedom from bondage?

Swami Satyananda says: “In the classical Indian system of sanatana dharma, the lifespan of a person is divided into four stages or *ashramas*. It is said that the lifespan of this body is one hundred years, and as it is divided into four periods, each ashrama is for a period of about twenty-five years. Of course these ‘twenty-five years’ are not exactly twenty-five years; one has to adjust them according to one’s personality. And of course everybody does not die at the age of one hundred. Some die at the age of sixty, and that is accidental.

“According to the vedic system, the first ashrama is *brahmacharya ashrama*, the life of the student, the second is *grihastha ashrama*, the life of the householder, the third is *vanaprastha ashrama*, the life of developing renunciation, and the fourth is *sannyasa ashrama*, the life of the renounced spiritual seeker.

“During the first twenty-five years, the brahmacharya ashrama, the young people remain unmarried and study, building the body, mind, intelligence, knowledge and skills, in preparation for successfully living the adult life.

“During the next twenty-five years, the grihastha ashrama, the ashrama of the householder, they are married and procreate children, fulfil their desires and experience all the idiosyncrasies of life. In this way, they fulfil the purpose of that stage and also their desires.

“During the third ashrama called vanaprastha ashrama, after having lived for fifty years, both husband and wife retire into seclusion. They withdraw from the duties and obligations of a householder, having to fulfil only certain compulsory obligations, otherwise no obligation is important to them. During these twenty-five years they perfect their mind for samadhi, because their minds do not trouble them any more. They have experienced the life of a householder, and they have reached the conclusion that one can never fulfil all one’s desires because desires are endless. They have also come to the conclusion that the whole show, the whole

drama, the whole theatre of life is imperfect, and what they have been expecting from this life, and expecting from everywhere or everyone else, was not right. This is a kind of disillusionment through which knowledge is born. They come to the conclusion, 'Now I must raise my *atman*, my inner consciousness.' They try to control the mind and the senses by withdrawing from sense enjoyment, and as they try to control the mind, they are preparing for the fourth ashrama.

"In the fourth ashrama, known as sannyasa ashrama, they have no worldly obligations, duties, or responsibilities. They have only one dharma, one single duty, which is the experience of the Supreme Consciousness, which is their substratum, their nucleus, their centre.

"Thus, in the first ashrama one is striving for physical, mental and intellectual capacities; in the second ashrama one is striving for enjoyment, for accomplishment, for accumulation of possessions, and so on; in the third ashrama one is trying to withdraw the senses and control the mind, and in the fourth ashrama one is only striving for self-knowledge, *atma vidya*." How this is done is the subject of the whole of the *Bhagavad Gita*.

The purusharthas

As we move through the four stages, we try to fulfil the four essential experiences of life, which are known as the *purusharthas*. They are *artha*: the earning and accumulation of the material things for our use; *kama*: the fulfilment of our desire for sensual pleasures; *dharma*: conducting our life in the most personally appropriate, moral and ethical way; and *moksha*: liberation from the 'wheel of samsara', the cycle of births and deaths.

Moksha is of course the ultimate goal for everyone, but it is foremost in the latter two stages of life; artha and kama are emphasized during the householder stage, and dharma is essential for all four stages. Swami Satyananda cautions us to make sure that our dharma constantly monitors artha

and kama; especially that we conduct our dealings in the material things of life and in our intimate relationships with the utmost moderation, ethics and consideration for others. He tells us: “If you do not follow dharma on the way to artha and kama, then artha and kama will always lead you to the path of adharma. Artha means the same everywhere, acquiring wealth and prosperity, and kama means fulfilling desire. What is that desire? There are three main kinds of desire in this world: to have a good wife or husband, to have prosperity, and to have children. These three desires or wishes are within everybody, nobody is free from them. Most people want a good partner, a comfortable house or flat and, if possible, a car, and then a child; and a few people, not everyone, have an additional desire for fame and power. How are you going to strike a balance between these three desires which are inborn in all human beings?

“This subject has to be given due consideration by the householders in grihastha ashrama. You are likely to fall if you do not apply a brake on the artha and kama aspects, they could destroy your entire energy. However, when you are properly balanced within, on account of the presence of dharma, you will then be in a position to correctly implement the artha and kama aspects in your life. This is the syllabus for the grihastha ashrama spiritual life.”

Dharma as an essential ingredient of lifestyle

Dharma is an essential ingredient in the lifestyle of every one of us. To be moving along the path of life in the most personally appropriate way ‘greases the wheels’ of our progress. Acting in the most ethical and moral way as we deal with other people, society, and this world that we live in helps to ‘smooth the inevitable bumps’ along the way. Dharma is an essential ingredient in the lifestyle of karma yoga, and that is a major theme in the *Bhagavad Gita*.

5

Karma Yoga

Sri Krishna now introduces the subject which is crucial to the whole *Bhagavad Gita*: karma yoga. Previously he had been instructing Arjuna in areas of *jnana yoga*, knowledge, especially that of reincarnation, the indestructibility of spirit, equanimity and dharma. Now he says:

Arjuna, this attitude of mind has been presented to you from the point of view of jnana yoga; now hear the same as presented from the standpoint of karma yoga (the yoga of selfless action). Equipped with this attitude of mind, you will be able to throw off completely the shackles of karma. (2:39)

Chapter 3 is all about karma yoga, but first there is just a short introduction. Sri Krishna says:

In this path (of disinterested action) there is no loss of effort, nor is there fear of contrary result, even a little practice of this discipline saves one from the terrible fear of birth and death. (2:40)

Even only slightly moving our lives in the direction of karma yoga will have a positive result. This is reassuring, because when we really look at all the requirements for karma yoga, we see that it requires a big change in attitudes and lifestyle compared with the life people usually lead.

Sri Krishna comments on the principle of one-pointed awareness, which is what makes karma yoga ‘meditation in action’:

Arjuna, in karma yoga the intellect is determinate and directed singly towards one ideal; whereas the intellect of the undecided (the ignorant person moved by desires) wanders in all directions, after innumerable aims. (2:41)

He then continues by explaining the principle of renouncing any of the ‘fruits’, the benefits or rewards that come from our actions, and this comes up repeatedly throughout the *Gita*.

Your right is only to work, but never to the fruits that come from it. Don't be instrumental in making your actions bear fruit, but also don't be attached to inaction. (2:47)

We need to be performing some activity, not just lazing around the place. We must be doing something useful, but in accordance with the principles of karma yoga. We should not be attached to the benefits that the action offers us, such as money, material possessions, kudos, fame, admiration, etc.

Of course if we are to live in this life we must have income, therefore some value must ‘come in’. We need ‘the fruits’ of our efforts to pay the bills, to eat, to have housing, to afford the infrastructure in which to perform our work, and so forth. However, we must avoid being attached to receiving the ‘fruits’ or working only for the rewards, or to getting entangled in them when we do get them. How do we know when we are attached or entangled in things? We know from our negative emotional reactions when we don’t get them, or when we risk losing them.

Karma yoga is the great vehicle by which we interact with our world, exposing ourselves to situations where we can observe our reactions and analyze them. It is the ‘battleground’ where we interact with the world and the people in it, and where we learn about ourselves in the process. How do we learn about ourselves? By observing our reactions and asking questions about them. For instance: “I became angry because of what he did. Why is this thing so important to me? What was the thought that led to the anger? He pushed one of my ‘buttons’, which of

my ‘buttons’ was pressed? Why am I vulnerable in this way? Can I recall what happened to me in the past to make me thus vulnerable? Maybe I have time for a short meditation to find out.”

Even if we can’t analyze the cause, we can become aware of our tendency to respond in this way, recognize when ‘the button’ is pressed in the future, decide whether we want to respond or not, and what response to make. This is yet another reminder of the desirability of equanimity.

Arjuna, perform your duties established in Yoga, renouncing attachment, and even-tempered in success and failure; evenness of temper is called Yoga. (2:48)

Then Sri Krishna comes out with this interesting statement:

Action is far lower than the Yoga of Wisdom, O Arjuna. You must seek refuge in wisdom; wretched are they whose motive is the fruit. (2:49)

Of course Sri Krishna is talking here about action followed by attachment to the ‘fruits’, and we may consider what he is implying: that if we have the wisdom, we will find it easy to recognize our potential attachment, and thus become unattached. However, there is another thing about this statement: he is ‘setting up’ Arjuna to ask the question that opens Chapter 3, twenty-three verses later. However, the subject now is karma yoga, and we should have an overview of what karma yoga is all about.

Karma yoga is one of the ‘lifestyle yogas’. It is a way in which we can live our whole life, not something that we simply do in the morning and then forget about. If we are doing it properly, then we are doing it all day at work and play; indeed it *is* the work and the play, both.

The following ten points are mentioned and repeated many times throughout the *Bhagavad Gita*, so let us put them together now (derived from *Practical Yoga Psychology* by Dr Rishi Vivekananda, Yoga Publications Trust, Munger, Bihar, India):

The ten principles of karma yoga

1. Action: service in the world for others and the world.
2. Non-expectation: not preoccupied with or attached to getting the reward.
3. Non-attachment: not attached to rewards when we receive them.
4. Meditative awareness: one-pointed concentration on what is happening.
5. Swadharma: following our most appropriate personal life direction and duty.
6. Equanimity: balanced mind despite positive or negative experiences.
7. Positive attitude: remaining positive, which includes humour.
8. Efficiency: try to make the action as efficient as possible.
9. Non-ego involvement: experiencing non-doership, simply being an instrument.
10. Surrender: all activities are given to the Supreme Spirit.

Many of these are dealt with in some detail in other parts of this work, but here is a summary of the ten points:

1. Action in the world for others and the world

Action is the first principle of karma yoga. The Sanskrit word for action is ‘karma’, but this is ‘karma yoga’, a very special type of action. It is dedicated for the benefit of our world and everything in it: other people, society, and the physical aspects of Planet Earth. This is the principle of service, *seva*, our actions are done in the world, for the world, and for the benefit of others.

The first thing we notice when we do this is that our relationships with other people become more positive and harmonious. In addition, if we are working for the world or for the benefit of others, we are working in concert with our Higher Self, our unitive aspect, and that produces immediate harmony and tuning-in to our higher levels of evolvment. As well as that, if we are working for others, we have no personal expectations, so we don’t have the disappointments

that are caused by unmet expectations either of ourselves or others. Thus we avoid the stress that can hold us down in the lower levels.

Still, this idea of selfless service in karma yoga can be difficult to get across to people. Their receptivity to it really depends on the level of their personal involvement. If we broach the subject to people of dull nature, *tamasic* nature, the whole idea seems ridiculous to them, they may even be suspicious of our veracity or our motives. The person who has strong personal ambition, a *rajasic* nature, will also have trouble seeing the sense in giving of ourselves in this way without getting plenty in return. However, for those who have a *sattwic* nature, those people who are already living at a higher level of kindness and generosity, the idea immediately appeals to them and they can see how living life in the karma yoga way can help one evolve and enjoy life. These three qualities of nature, the *gunas* of *tamas*, *rajas* and *sattwa*, are dealt with extensively later in this commentary.

2. Non-expectation

Non-expectation is undertaking the activity without being preoccupied or obsessed with the personal rewards or other expectations: performing the actions without craving results. It is doing the job for the sake of the job itself; doing your duty simply because it is the duty inherent in your dharma. As Sri Krishna said,

Engage in the battle for the sake of the battle. (2:38)

It is non-attachment to future results, but must we have NO expectations at all? Obviously if we are doing a worthwhile job, we will have some expectations of a positive outcome of the job itself, but even then we must be flexible enough in those expectations to accept the inevitable changes life throws at us along the way to mess up our best endeavours.

However, what about preoccupation with ‘personal’ results and rewards? All those that stem from the qualities

of personality, preoccupations that change from one person to another? If we just work for the welfare of the world and other individuals, and for the sake of the work itself, we will have peace of mind. My father often used to say, “Don’t expect anything, then if you don’t get anything you won’t be disappointed.”

Shouldn’t we expect some reward? Surely if I need the money I can expect to be paid for my work. Of course, if we need to be paid so that we can support ourselves and maybe the family, this should be established as agreements or even contracts at the beginning, then we can devote our attention to the work. However, in the process of giving of ourselves, something strange often happens. Many people who embark on the road of karma yoga find that they start to receive abundant payment. This may be because the people they work for appreciate their efforts, but it may also be because this is part of the natural law of karma; we do indeed reap what we sow.

Certainly it is not possible for an embodied being to abandon actions entirely; but one who relinquishes the rewards of actions is definitely a person of renunciation. (18:11)

Therefore, although it is not possible for embodied beings to renounce action, it is certainly possible to renounce the results of the action. Our desires of what we want to get from our world vary in degree from demands to expectations to preferences, and as we continue on the path of yoga we find that more and more of our demands are becoming expectations, more and more of our expectations are becoming only preferences, and more and more of our preferences may even become a willingness to experience something new. As this happens, our contentment in life grows apace.

3. Non-attachment to the rewards

This means having non-attachment to the results of our activities. What are these results? Chapter 3 of the *Bhagavad Gita* tells us:

As ignorant people act from attachment to action . . . so should the wise act without attachment, wishing the welfare of the world. (3:25)

Attachment and aversion for the objects of the senses abide in the senses; let none come under their sway; for they are the foes. (3:34)

To what do we become attached? Our attraction, *raga*, to all those sensual objects of our desires, and our repulsion, *dvesha*, from those things we don't want. There is a whole range, which includes all the aspects of the personality related to our chakras, such as:

- *Mooladhara*: attracted to external sources of security, money and possessions; repelled by threatening situations and potential losses of money and possessions.
- *Swadhisthana*: attracted to sensual pleasures including sex, situations and people who give us pleasure; repelled by discomforts and pain, and 'depressing' situations.
- *Manipura*: attracted to situations that give us power and control and boost our self-esteem or ego; repelled by threats to our power and control and situations of embarrassment and shame.
- *Anahata*: attracted to situations from which we can 'get love'; repelled by situations where we are not 'getting love' or are getting rejection.
- *Vishuddhi*: attracted to avenues for communication and socialization; repelled by solitude, loneliness and boredom.
- *Ajna*: attraction to sources of information (usually for use in our control); repulsion from situations where we don't have the information we desire.

There are two questions wanting to be asked here:

1. "What is wrong with those things we are attracted to?"
Answer: Nothing, as long as they are helpful for the work we have to do. However, they are not lasting; life takes them from us, then the problem becomes our attachment: our addiction to them. It is the pain from the attachment which holds us back, and for which we have to be eternally

vigilant. The big question is: “Do you own those things or do they own you?”

2. “Isn’t it natural to be repelled by those negative things such as having our money taken, discomforts and pain, powerlessness, unrequited love, boredom, lack of information, and so on?” Answer: Yes, not many people enjoy those, but they occur in our life. Once again, the problem is the degree of our emotional attachments to avoiding them. If the avoidance becomes compulsive, we are likely to get caught up in all sorts of addictions and escapism, and then our service to the world and our own evolverment fall down in a heap.

Non-attachment is an anti-stressor and helps us to evolve, because if we are not attached to something, we are no longer afraid to lose it so there is no fear. There are some people with a lot of money; they care for it, but they are not attached to it, therefore they can live a contented life and often use the money for good purposes.

If we do lose it there is no disappointment, worry or anger. Swami Niranjana says, “The opposite of attachment is compassion, *karuna*.” So the corollary to this is that the more attachment we have to material objects and other overvalued objects and attitudes, the less compassion we have for people. Regarding the material objects, remember the statement: “You can’t take it with you when you die.” What do you take with you instead? All the karma, positive or negative, that was associated with it.

The person of renunciation, pervaded by purity, intelligent and with their doubts cut asunder, does not hate a disagreeable work nor is attached to an agreeable one. (18:10)

Central to karma yoga is non-attachment to the outcome, and this requires flexibility and non-expectation.

4. Meditative awareness: concentration

This is a typical example of how the techniques of yoga that we perform impact directly on our life. The concentration

developed from the meditation technique we do with eyes closed in the morning, or whenever we get some quiet time, trains us to take those skills out into the world. This mind-state then continues with our eyes open. We receive many benefits such as:

Concentration: Concentration on any job helps us to work more efficiently so that the work flows smoothly, and it is amazing how quickly the time goes, too. In addition to this, if we are concentrating completely on the work at hand, we forget about ourselves and about all those worries and resentments: we have eliminated the old ‘mind chatter’. People who master this ability of total concentration also realize happiness in the process. Most people seek happiness by pursuing pleasure, only to find that happiness moves further and further away from them. When they begin to concentrate on helping others, suddenly happiness arises, arriving when they least expect it.

Observation: During the process of observing both ourselves and the other in any given circumstance, we begin to realize the reactive patterns of thinking, feeling, and behaving, of both ourselves and the other. While observing we can ask ourselves: “What are my responses to this work? What are my responses to this person? What are their attitudes towards me and why? What are their responses to what I am doing?” We learn a lot about ourselves and other people this way, and we evolve in the process. In addition to this, observation of what is going on as the work unfolds keeps us on track.

Expansion of awareness: This is a bonus of the meditation practices. It gives us a bigger picture of what we are doing, and this allows us to make better decisions. Don’t underestimate this expansion of awareness that occurs as a result of any of form of meditation. I often think of the example of a military general and staff who must make strategic and tactical decisions in the course of battle. If they are on the ground, their information will be limited to what they can see, and maybe radio communications. However, if they are up in a helicopter, well above the whole battlefield,

they will have a big picture of where everybody is and how the battle is going, and will be able to make better decisions. Nowadays they even have small unpiloted aircraft called ‘drones’ that fly over enemy territory to observe what is going on and transmit it back to base, thus the general is on the ground and ‘in the air’ at the same time. At a higher level still, satellites are used. These are concrete examples, but in subtle ways they can also be applied in our everyday lives as well, as our overall point of view of life and work expands.

Position of the witness: This ability to observe without becoming emotionally involved protects us from getting entangled in the ‘dramas’ around us. At the same time, it allows us to make better decisions about any crises that come our way. It is the necessary skill for experiencing equanimity, because if we are not able to mentally stand back and objectively see a situation, we cannot keep our emotions from bursting forth.

Of course, as we develop all of these life skills, we create better responses to the situations of life. As our responses improve and become more appropriate, the responses felt from others also improve. Thus, we develop an ongoing lifestyle whereby we contribute improved responses, choices and decisions to the world, and are greeted with life-nourishing responses in return: a series of virtuous circles that benefit everyone involved. Perhaps as we develop spiritually, the accelerating expansion of our evolverment is actually helped by these virtuous circles, which then continue to improve our mental, emotional and social wellbeing.

5. Swadharma: personal life direction and duty

Sri Krishna emphasizes this strongly throughout the *Gita*. The field of action in which one performs is best if it is harmonious with one’s own personal dharma: the most appropriate life course according to the internal qualities of the person. It involves their occupation, their personal lifestyle and their performance of the duties that are inherent in that way of life.

As we have mentioned, Arjuna was a prince and a tough man by nature: combative, brave, skilful with weapons, thus his dharma was combat; it was his job to kill people, and Sri Krishna repeatedly reminded him of it throughout their discussion. Another person may be naturally compassionate, sympathetic and dedicated to helping and nurturing others. Put them in a uniform, give them a gun and direct them to kill people, and it would not be appropriate, though it may be necessary in a national crisis such as in the example of yuga dharma mentioned earlier. Such a person is much better suited to saving lives as a doctor, nurse or other kind of a healer or helper.

Therefore, one should remain aware of one's own personal dharma in the sense of both an appropriate life direction and the duty that comes of it. As Sri Krishna said:

Therefore Arjuna, perform your bounden duty, because action is superior to inaction. (4:8)

There are two points here:

Appropriate life direction: One must reflect in this manner: 'Due to the qualities of my own personal nature, there is a way of life that is most appropriate to me as an individual, and the closer I can come to harmonizing my activities in that direction, the happier and more uplifting my life will be.' This applies to all of us. Many people are in the wrong place, in the wrong job, in the wrong relationships; they are 'square pegs in round holes', and are just as uncomfortable.

Duty: Each way of life contains within it certain obligations and duties, and these must be performed. Arjuna was 'cut out' to be a military commander, and the duty inherent in that was the necessity of killing people. In contrast to this, some of us are naturally inclined to be doctors, so our duty involves not taking lives, but saving them.

In *Yoga Darshan*, Swami Niranjan describes this point and karma yoga in general: "Consider . . . every action to be a duty. Do your duty, for action is superior to inaction. When action is performed with the idea of duty, it produces a very

deep experience of *bhakti*, surrender, belief, trust and faith in a higher nature, a higher reality guiding us. This duty is to be understood in relation to one's individual, social, global and universal dharma.

“When one develops the awareness of dharma as an inherent commitment, duty or obligation towards other beings, then one develops a giving or helping nature. Often people talk about and believe in giving a helping hand to others, but our actions, which may seem outwardly like helping, do not necessarily convey the same feeling to others. Even the desire to help others often carries with it some thought of gain or profit. Helping others is in itself a dharma. We should not be restricted by the idea of some kind of personal gain.

“Initially the practice of karma yoga is difficult, because combining the concepts of efficiency, non-expectation, equanimity, egolessness, renunciation and duty in one action is difficult. The thrust of karma yoga is to have these concepts combined in one thought, in one action, in one moment. Once these ideas are combined, we can then say that we are practising karma yoga.”

However, until we can achieve that combination and truly practise karma yoga, we can do the best we can to create this attitude. Recall that Sri Krishna said:

On this path there is no loss of effort, nor is there fear of contrary result, even a little practice of this discipline saves one from the terrible fear of birth and death. (2:40)

In any situation, be it in the workplace, at home with the family, with other people, and indeed even when we are alone and relating only to ourselves, we can always remember to apply the principles of karma yoga. Over time it will become second nature in all our actions, bringing a peace of mind that most people never attain. Karma yoga clears the mind of phobias, insecurities and complexes, and makes it steadier for further practices and for evolving in this life. The ultimate state is total serenity in the midst of intense action.

6. Equanimity

Balance of mind and emotions in success or failure, praise or criticism, fame or disgrace, or other pairs of opposites in any positive or negative life situations is essential for the harmonious conduct of karma yoga.

7. Positive attitude: including humour

Swami Niranjana says, “If someone gives you a beautiful bunch of roses, do you see the beautiful flowers or the thorns?” It is looking on the positive side of all life’s activities. Some people are optimists, they customarily see the positive side of things; some are pessimists who usually see things negatively. What’s the difference? According to yogic thinking, some of the differences between these people would be:

1. Physical, in the case of an ongoing blockage in the flow of air through one of the nostrils. Remember we mentioned that if the air is flowing through only one nostril, the brain hemisphere on the opposite side is activated, and the hemisphere on the same side is deactivated. In the great majority of people, activation of the left hemisphere makes us experience optimism and extroversion, while activation of the right hemisphere makes us experience pessimism and introversion. These tendencies can become chronic if there is ongoing dominance of one side of the brain. The person can get stuck in continuous optimism or pessimism irrespective of what is happening in their life, neither of which is appropriate. In yoga we try to keep the air flow through the nostrils relatively balanced. There are many practices that affect our balance generally, and specific ones such as neti.
2. Deep unconscious fears caused by emotional trauma in the past can cause a person to be hyper-vigilant and always meet new situations with pessimism.
3. Sheer habit, often copied from a pessimistic parent.
4. Being successful or unsuccessful in the other aspects of karma yoga as discussed here.

All four points are eminently improvable by yoga, and if a person is habitually pessimistic, they should rectify the situation to try to get a sensible, balanced and positive attitude. We can strive to bring forth our positive attitudes, and notice and then ignore the negative and inappropriate ones. One general way to do this is to ‘Count your blessings’. If things are difficult, remember: “It could be worse, think of the good things in this situation.”

Swami Niranjan’s question is very apt: “Do we see the beautiful flowers or the thorns?” The choice is ours.

8. Efficiency

We may define efficiency as ‘doing the work as cleanly, neatly, quickly, economically and effectively as possible’. Inefficiency causes problems, problems cause stress, and stress keeps us down in the more tamasic levels where the work becomes even less efficient: another tamasic vicious circle. So do it right in the first place.

If we are truly practising karma yoga as ‘meditation in action’, the efficiency will come automatically, because it is our *concentration* on the job that helps us to work efficiently. In addition, *observation* of what is going on keeps us on track as the work unfolds. The *expansion* of one’s awareness that develops with meditation allows us to observe the whole event or situation, and think ‘outside the square’. In order to be efficient, one must be able to observe the whole event; to have the ‘big picture’. Hopefully, one is also in the position of the *witness* to prevent one from being diverted from the job by the emotional ‘sideshows’ going on around.

One trick is to try to make the job perfect, but do it as a game, just for fun, not as a compulsive imperative. While doing this, keep an eye on your reactions.

9. Non-ego involvement or non-doership

Try to keep your ego out of the situation. This is the attitude of being the instrument only, not the doer; the realization that you are not indispensable. People find this

very difficult because we like our ego rewards, so the first step we must undertake is to reduce the ego attachments such as the ones mentioned above. When this is working properly, a wonderful feeling is discovered: the work just flows along as if guided by a higher force. One finds that everything needed for the job comes their way, and everyone needed to help comes along at exactly the right time. It all happens so regularly that we realize these couldn't possibly be coincidences. Then a higher realization begins to dawn within; one becomes aware of an agency that is working through them, and for this one must be very much in the witness position. As we have mentioned before, when we stand back a little and observe this divine grace in action, we can see that as the work is unfolding it brings in whomever or whatever is needed for the work, just at the right time.

Some people say that what appears to be divine grace is simply coincidence, but when the grace is really flowing, it happens so consistently that the odds of these many coincidences occurring in a row are astronomical. Others suggest that it is caused by one's positive frame of mind attracting the good fortune, but sometimes the train of circumstances that leads to the result started many years ago, long before the task at hand was even thought of. It develops in us the sense of non-doership, the sense that 'I am not the one who is running this game, I'm just the person who moves some of the pieces on the board', and then one watches it unfold. However, we must keep in mind that each of us must move the piece that is our duty to move.

To interpret Sri Krishna in Chapter 5 of the *Gita*:

The person who is in harmony, who realizes the truth, thinks 'I do nothing at all'. (5:8)

Because in seeing, hearing, smelling or touching, in eating, walking, sleeping or breathing, in talking, grasping or relaxing, even in opening or closing their eyes, the person realizes: 'It is only the senses moving among the sense-objects'. (5:9)

The next step is then to give the whole thing to the Supreme Spirit. It can be the most difficult step, but paradoxically, if we have already successfully renounced any 'ownership' of the work, it is easy because we have nothing to give.

10. Surrender all activities to the divine power

We are simply instruments of divine grace. As Jesus said (Luke 22:42), "Not my will, O Lord, but Yours." In that state of awareness, there is no stress. If you are not the doer, and you are unattached to the outcome of the process, and anyway you realize it is 'all in good hands', how can you have a problem? So karma yoga, properly lived, is the ultimate anti-stress mechanism and takes us to the highest communion, the partnership with the Supreme. Through karma yoga, all life becomes a sacrament, as karma yoga, jnana yoga, raja yoga and bhakti yoga become one at this high level. It is all based on selfless action.

These could be called the ten principles of karma yoga, eight of which are dealt with clearly and frequently in the *Bhagavad Gita*.

6

Managing Desires

In Chapter 3, Sri Krishna makes an interesting statement:

All living creatures follow their tendencies; even the wise person acts according to the tendencies of their own nature. What use is any external restraint? (3:33)

Desire as the main problem

What hope do we have? This seems to imply that we are mindlessly under the sway of our inner impulses, and certainly until one is fully God-realized, not even just wise, he or she will always tend to follow their nature despite attempts at restraint. However, the next verse explains that we can redeem ourselves if we can manage our attractions to those things we desire, *raga*, and our repulsions from those things we desire to avoid, *dvesha*.

Attraction and repulsion for the objects of the senses abide in the senses. People should never allow themselves to be swayed by them, because they are the two principal enemies standing in the way of our redemption. (3:34)

Swami Sivananda explains: “Each of the five senses has attraction for agreeable objects and aversion for disagreeable objects . . . If one can control these two currents, if one can rise above the sway of love and hate through discrimination

and right enquiry, one can conquer Nature and attain immortality and eternal bliss.”

How easy is this? It is very difficult, because after years of repetition our responses have become automatic, and even before we can ask the right questions in our ‘right enquiry’, or apply our discrimination, we have to be able to objectively witness our emotions and responses to situations and experiences.

It is interesting to note Swami Sivananda’s wording in his translation of verse 34: “Attraction and repulsion for the objects of the senses abide in the senses.” He makes allowance here for the fact that, because the basis of all responses is in the senses of every individual, we will all be attracted to and repelled by different sense objects coming from other people. Of course there are some common stimuli out there that will attract or repel all of us equally, but in the majority of cases, our responses will be different. You dislike certain things that someone else loves; you are really attracted to this or that, thinking constantly about how nice it would be to have it while someone else doesn’t care for it at all. This means that the task of recognizing our attractions and our repulsions and the emotions they generate, as well as the task of performing our intended responses, will be different for each of us.

This apparently started Arjuna thinking about all the naughty things he is attracted to, and how difficult it is to resist the temptation, because he said to Sri Krishna:

Now impelled by what, Krishna, does a person commit sin even involuntarily, as though driven by force? (3:36)

We know what we should do, most of us do know the right thing from the wrong thing, but we don’t do it. Why not? We are like Donald Duck with a little angel on his right shoulder imploring him to act with kindness and consideration towards others, and a little devil on his left shoulder encouraging him not to care about other people, to satisfy only himself. Why do we prefer to go the way of the

imaginary little devil rather than the angel? Sri Krishna tells us, “It is due to desire.”

It is desire begotten of the element of rajas, which appears as anger; it is insatiable and grossly wicked. Know this to be the enemy in this case. (3:37)

“It is desire that comes from rajas” seems to me a rather strange statement. Surely the person under the influence of tamas has many desires, especially to avoid the mental pain they are experiencing or to inflict pain on someone else, or maybe just to be left alone in their laziness. Certainly from rajas comes plenty of desire for personal gain of some sort, especially for things of the lower three chakras: material possessions, sex or power. This is why we need to work with the lower chakras as well as the upper ones, as in the Satyananda system. Even people in sattwa may have desires for spiritual evolverment or to be instrumental in helping others; some desires can actually help us along our spiritual path, so they are certainly not ‘grossly wicked’, though we may have to evolve past them in the end.

Desire can appear as anger when it is unsatisfied, but it can generate other emotions too, such as greed, lust, and even pleasant anticipation. It is interesting that Sri Krishna calls desire ‘insatiable’; it certainly is, for as soon as we have one desire satisfied, another one takes its place. Trying to satisfy desires is like a dog chasing its own tail, we get nowhere and we are never satisfied.

Why is it that we are never satisfied? Brain chemistry may be part of the answer. There are a number of neurotransmitters in the brain that have to do with pleasure; dopamine is possibly the main one, endorphins and noradrenalin are others. If you have the pleasant anticipation of a desire, there is a secretion of dopamine, for example, which produces the feeling of pleasure. If you fulfil the desire the pleasure dies away. When the situation occurs again, there is not as much dopamine released as the first time, and if it is repeated yet again, there is even less.

Not only do we become tolerant to pleasure chemicals from external sources, like drugs and alcohol, for example, but we also become tolerant to our own internal pleasure chemicals.

As we continue to fulfil a desire the pleasure reward reduces, and if we want to maintain the pleasure level, we have to either increase the stimulus, or change the desire wanting to be satisfied. It never ends. This is why in yoga we try to identify less with the body-mind unit and its attraction and repulsion mechanisms and more with our spiritual reality. Also, as we evolve and progress into the sattvic levels, the desires simply fall away automatically.

As fire is covered by smoke, a mirror by dust, and an embryo by the amnion, so is knowledge covered by desire. (3:38)

Thus our wisdom is enveloped by this constant enemy of the wise in the form of desire, which is as difficult to be appeased as fire. (3:39)

Even the wisdom of the wise person becomes corrupted by desire, and it is very powerful and difficult to control. The translator here, Swami Chinmayananda, has used the English word ‘appeased’ which means ‘pacified’, but it also contains the notion of submitting to the demands of the person we are trying to pacify. This is exactly the problem with desire, the more we give in to it, the more persistent it becomes.

Where does the desire come from?

The senses, the mind and the intellect are declared to be its seat; screening the light of Truth through these; it (desire) deludes the embodied soul. (3:40)

From the senses comes the statement, ‘I see that’. From the mind comes the fantasy, ‘I experienced pleasure when I had that before, so I want it again’ and ‘Wouldn’t it be lovely if I could have . . .’ Then from the intellect comes a higher level of mental functioning such as logic and planning, ‘How can I get that thing I want?’ It doesn’t even need to come from sensory experience; it can start from

the memory, then the mind ruminates about past pleasures or troubles. Swami Chinmayananda wrote: “The deluded ego, foolishly identifying with the body, desires sense enjoyments. Thoughtlessly identifying with the mind, it thirsts to experience more and more emotional satisfactions. And lastly, identifying with the intellect, it plans to re-live the remembered experiences of sense-enjoyments and mental-joys.”¹

If the abode of the enemy is known, it is quite easy to kill him. So Sri Krishna, like a wise army general, points out to Arjuna the abode of desire so that he may be able to attack it and kill it quite readily.

Managing the sensual urges

Yoga teaches us how we can watch the behaviour of the senses, the workings of the instinctual mind, and the movements of the intellectual mind. In that way we can see how they create desire within us, and we can stop it at its root. However, it is not easy.

Why is managing our desire so difficult? Why is it insatiable and ‘as difficult to be appeased as fire’? The difficulty arises because desire is being driven by the most powerful of basic instincts, that of self-preservation and reproduction of the species: protection of oneself and of one’s offspring, procuring food, and sexual activity. Those are the basic preoccupations of the body-mind mechanism: getting a meal without becoming a meal, finding a mate, and protecting the young. When an animal detects something in its environment, three automatic questions come to it:

1. What is it?
2. Is it good for me or bad for me?
If I can eat it or mate with it, it’s good. If it wants to eat me, it’s bad.
3. If it’s good for me, how can I get it? Or if it’s bad for me, how can I either defeat it (fight) or avoid it (flight)?

¹ *The Holy Geeta*, Commentary by Swami Chinmayananda, Central Chinmaya Mission Trust, Mumbai

No wonder the desires based on those instincts are so powerful; at the instinctual level it means destruction if we don't get it right, either the destruction of me or of my 'corner' of the species.

Therefore, Arjuna, you must first control your senses, and then kill this evil thing which obstructs jnana (self-knowledge) and vijñana (self-realization). (3:41)

How do we control these senses? Yoga has practices through which we can develop this ability, such as pratyahara, developing the witness position or becoming the *drashta* or *sakshi*, and of course, karma yoga when practised correctly. As we progress into sattwa we outgrow the desires of the body-mind and the attraction of the senses. This is the direction of yoga. Swami Sivananda wrote: "Desire is the quality of rajas. If you increase the sattwic quality in you, you can conquer desire. Rajas cannot stand before sattwa."

Swami Niranjan put it nicely in his New Year Message for 2009: "What are your resolutions for the New Year? In your list, only two types of items will have been mentioned: the bad that you wish to leave behind, the good that you wish to receive. Why try to leave behind something which is part of your nature? Why try to gain something which is already inherent within you? Even dropping anything brings pain, while acquiring something brings satisfaction, which is the prelude to pain, and those who tell us to leave behind do not understand this simple principle. If you wish to leave anything behind, then make sure that what you leave behind is the pain. But why even worry about that? You will be what you will be. What do you think as you climb a ladder? Once your foot finds a step, the previous step is automatically left behind. In action, the process of leaving behind appears to be predominant, but in reality, attainment will be first and foremost. Initially, the first rung of the ladder is left, but prior to that the second rung has already been surmounted. Only after realizing, 'I have attained the next rung', is the previous one left behind.

So, think of mounting higher steps and the rest will be left behind naturally.”

Sri Krishna went on to say:

The senses are said to be greater than the body; but greater than the senses is the mind. Greater than the mind is the intellect; and what is greater than the intellect is He (the Self or Atman). (3:42)

Swami Sivananda wrote: “When compared with the physical body, which is gross, external and limited, the senses are certainly superior because they are more subtle, internal, and have a wider range of activity. The mind is superior to the senses, because the senses cannot do anything independent of the mind. The mind can perform the functions of the five senses. The intellect is superior to the mind because it is endowed with the faculty of discrimination. When the mind is in a state of doubt, the intellect comes to its rescue. The Self, the witness, is superior even to the intellect, because the intellect borrows its light from the Self.”

Swami Chinmayananda wrote: “The technique of meditation lies in the conscious withdrawal of all our identifications with our body, mind and intellect. All efforts end when we have thus gathered our entire awareness from its delusory preoccupations and made it live in Itself as Itself – as Objectless Awareness. The goal gained by pursuing this art of is explained in the following (verse) . . .”²

Sri Krishna said:

Thus, Arjuna, knowing that which is higher than the intellect and subduing the mind by reason, kill this enemy in the form of desire that is so difficult to overcome. (3:43)

Swami Sivananda explained this verse as follows: “Restrain the lower self by the Higher Self. Subdue the lower mind by the higher mind. It is difficult to conquer desire because it is of a highly complex and incomprehensible nature. But a person of

² *The Holy Geeta*, Commentary by Swami Chinmayananda, Central Chinmaya Mission Trust, Mumbai

discrimination and dispassion who does constant and intense sadhana can conquer it quite easily . . . The simple and direct method is to appeal to the Indwelling Presence (Atman) through prayer and japa (mantra repetition)."

Sri Krishna went on to say:

The desire for sensual pleasures fades away if one abstains from sense enjoyment, but the craving for sense enjoyment remains. The craving disappears only from one who has known the Supreme Being. (2:59)

Restless senses, O Arjuna, forcibly carry away the mind of even a wise person striving for perfection. (2:60)

Therefore one should fix one's mind on the Lord with loving contemplation after bringing the senses under control. One's intellect becomes steady when one's senses are under complete control. (2:61)

If we dwell in our mind on sense objects by thinking about them endlessly, we develop an attachment for them. This can happen even to a wise person who is practising self-control. However, we can learn to become aware, realize when we are becoming preoccupied with our desires, and choose whether we are going to continue with the thoughts that will eventually lead us to succumbing to them. Of course this does not eradicate them, they are the powerful motivating force for the body-mind, but we can control them. Especially, as Sri Krishna recommends, by "... fix(ing) the mind on the Lord with loving contemplation." This becomes increasingly easier as one success leads to further success, but the desires are still there. As Sri Krishna tells us, they don't disappear until we become enlightened, until we become one with the Supreme Spirit.

The dangers of desire

The person dwelling on sense-objects develops attachment for them; from attachment springs up desire, and from desire ensues anger. (2:62)

Why does desire make us angry? The anger is due to the frustration felt when our desires are not fulfilled. When we are getting what we want we are happy, but life seems to be cleverly designed to deprive us of some of the things we want, then we become angry. Even when our desires are satisfied we often become frightened of losing those things we have acquired, so we still don't have peace of mind.

From anger arises infatuation; from infatuation, confusion of memory; from confusion of memory, loss of reason; and from loss of reason the person goes to complete ruin. (2:63)

What does Sri Krishna mean by 'infatuation' here? Maybe the meaning is 'obsessive passion for something'; when we can't have it, we can't stop thinking about our frustration. "Isn't it terrible that I didn't get . . ." As a result of this, the memory becomes confused, because we fail to remember the positive side of the situation and the people in it. Due to that we lose our faculty of discrimination to differentiate between the real and the unreal (delusion), right and wrong (faulty conscience), and cannot apply general common sense. The course from there is downhill, and many people's lives have ended in disaster down that slippery path Sri Krishna has described.

One of the great things that yoga gives us is the ability to objectively look at our thinking patterns. If you look at the above path to ruin, you will see that it is a series of steps of thinking leading to emotion; from a thought comes a feeling and in this case the feelings are destructive ones. We can learn to interrupt the downhill slide by identifying an emotion/feeling, analyzing the thoughts that preceded it, and deciding to stop the process. Most people have not learnt to do this, they just get caught up in the mental 'train wreck' and go on helplessly downhill, but yogis learn to be aware of their thoughts and to control them.

But the self-controlled person, while enjoying the various sense-objects through the senses, which are disciplined and free from likes and dislikes, attains peace of mind. (2:64)

With the attainment of such placidity of mind, all his sorrows come to an end; and the intellect of such a person of tranquil mind, soon withdrawing itself from all sides, becomes firmly established in God. (2:65)

Here Sri Krishna is describing the self-controlled person, who is not obsessed with desires, and who therefore has peace of mind, and becomes one with the highest. He is talking about the attraction of the senses, and how we can enjoy the various sense-objects if we have the mind-control to avoid the attachment to those sense objects. Usually, the more we think about the desires, the more we become attached to them, and our obsession with them steers our life in the wrong direction. However, when we are living karma yoga, our thoughts are concentrated on the task at hand, not what we are going to get from it, and our motivation is concentrated on doing the best we can in our mission of service: problem solved. If we don't live karma yoga and control the mind we will have no peace in life, as Sri Krishna describes here:

A person who has not controlled their mind and senses can have no reason; nor can such an undisciplined person think of God. The unthinking person can have no peace; and how can there be happiness for one lacking peace of mind? (2:66)

Just as the wind sweeps a boat on the water off course, even just one of the senses on which a person's mind focuses can take away their discrimination. (2:67)

Therefore, O Arjuna, one's intellect becomes steady when the senses are completely withdrawn from sense objects. (2:68)

What Sri Krishna is recommending here is known as *pratyahara*, the withdrawal of the senses, and we usually think of it as a stage along the way to meditation. How can we observe *pratyahara*, which we usually practise with the eyes closed, while we are supposed to be active during the day? That is one of the beauties of such practices, because as we

develop these skills with the eyes closed, they become more and more useful with the eyes open. As we develop the ability to 'switch off' from the stimuli around us during meditation practices (by concentrating on what is happening within), we are also developing the skill to avoid being caught up in all the 'dramas', temptations and petty troubles around us the rest of the time, especially by concentrating on the work at hand as we live our life of karma yoga.

That which is night to all beings, in that the self-controlled person is awake; when all beings are awake, that is night for the muni who sees. (2:69)

To the ordinary person, reality is this world of the senses and our constant striving to satisfy our desires and avoid those things we do not want, but the God-realized yogi is oblivious to these. However, the ordinary person is blind to the realization of divine knowledge and supreme bliss, which is the natural state of consciousness of the yogi.

As the waters of different rivers enter the ocean; which though full on all sides remains undisturbed, likewise the person in whom all desires dissipate within the mind without creating any mental disturbance attains peace; but the person who hankers after such enjoyments does not have peace. (2:70)

The person who has given up all desires and moves free from attachment, egoism and thirst for enjoyment attains peace. (2:71)

Arjuna, such is the state of the God-realized soul, who having reached this state, overcomes delusion; and being established in this state, even at the last moment, attains Brahmic Bliss. (2:72)

This is the final stage of all we have been discussing. It is a long path to get there, but yoga gives us the tools to help ourselves along the way, then divine grace can take us to the ultimate.

Sacrifice

Now Sri Krishna goes into another area; how we can perform our actions so that they constitute sacrifice? This is an interesting part of the *Bhagavad Gita*, because he appears to be talking about the sacrificial rituals, *yajnas*, but at the same time there is a parallel meaning which is about each of us acting in our world as an act of sacrifice. Many commentaries on the *Gita* don't include this meaning, but Swami Chinmayananda deals with it very clearly in *The Holy Geeta*.

Giving up for others

Sri Krishna's statement is:

A person is bound by their own action, except when it is performed for the sake of sacrifice. Therefore, Arjuna, you should efficiently perform your duty, free from attachment, for the sake of sacrifice alone. (3:9)

The word 'sacrifice' basically means giving up something of value for the benefit of someone or something else. One might say, "I have sacrificed most of my life to support that good cause." Or, "We sacrificed most of our money for six years to help our son through university."

Swami Chinmayananda wrote: "The following stanzas also will become more and more clear, and universally appropriate in their meaning, only when we understand yajna as 'any social, communal, national, or personal activity

into which the person is ready to pour himself forth entirely in a spirit of service and dedication’.”

He mentions especially ‘social, communal and national situations’. “Only when people come forward to act in a spirit of cooperation and self-dedication, can the community get itself freed from its shackles of poverty and sorrow.”³ It can then flourish in joy and harmony.

Swami Sivananda defined yajna as ‘sacrifice or a religious rite or any unselfish action done with a pure motive’. To help each other is the first commandment of the Creator:

Having created mankind along with the spirit of sacrifice at the beginning of creation, the Creator, Brahma, said to them: ‘You shall prosper by this; may this yield the enjoyment you seek’. (3:10)

The implication here is that by living this life of sacrifice, all our needs will be supplied by divine grace. Remember that by living this way we are not victims in any way unless we decide we are. We can give of ourselves or what we have generously and openheartedly, or we can do it resentfully; it is still giving, but each one of us chooses how we feel about it.

Foster the gods through this (sacrifice), and the gods will be gracious to you. Each fostering the other disinterestedly, you will attain the highest good. (3:11)

Fostered by sacrifice, the gods will surely bestow on you unasked, all the desired enjoyments. He who enjoys the gifts bestowed by them, without giving them in return, is undoubtedly a thief. (3:12)

Swami Chinmayananda wrote: “To understand this chapter in its more universal application, we have to interpret the term ‘gods’ to mean the ‘presiding deities’ of any field of activity that bless the worker with his profit. The deity that blesses the worker in a field of activity can be none other than ‘the productive potential’ of that field.

³ *The Holy Geeta*, Commentary by Swami Chinmayananda, Central Chinmaya Mission Trust, Mumbai

“When we apply in any situation our true and sincere work, the efforts and sacrifices so made, as it were, invoke the ‘productive potential’ in that situation, which then comes to manifest and bless the worker. Thus the person and ‘the gods’ foster each other.”

The typical analogy is the farmer. The farmer prepares the land, plants the seeds, arranges for watering, and then has to wait. Having sacrificed the time, the effort and the money, he can only wait while the ‘productive potential’ of the land produces the crop. Then there is benefit for the farmer and for other people as well. However, he must do the work in the first place, that is his duty according to his dharma as a farmer.

Divine grace, not coincidence

The passage, ‘Fostered by sacrifice, the gods will surely bestow on you unasked, all the desired enjoyments’ can have a different but related meaning in terms of divine grace. As we give of ourselves in the path of service, we become aware of amazing things happening to help us in our task; what we need comes to us, who we need comes along, and the whole thing goes smoothly. Even if one is sceptical at the beginning, too many beneficial ‘coincidences’ happen for it to be just chance.

The *Gita* develops this thought and once again we have symbolism, this time of the fire, *havan*, and the sacrifice:

The virtuous who partake of what is left over after sacrifice are absolved of all sins. Those sinful ones who cook for the sake of nourishing their body alone eat only sin. (3:13)

Swami Chinmayananda sees this as meaning: “When we earn a profit due to our sacrifices, we have every right to enjoy it, but no living creature should enjoy the benefits of another person’s sacrifice without contributing his own share to the total effort.”⁴

⁴ *The Holy Geeta*, Commentary by Swami Chinmayananda, Central Chinmaya Mission Trust, Mumbai

He develops that theme quite comprehensively in his commentary, and it is worth taking a closer reading of it. A more contemporary comment on the subject is:

Enter stranger, but take heed
of what awaits the sin of greed,
for those who take but do not earn,
must pay most dearly in their turn

—*Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone*, J. K. Rowling

Sri Krishna goes on to say:

All beings are evolved from food; production of food is dependent on rain; rain ensues from sacrifice, and sacrifice is rooted in prescribed action. (3:14)

You should know that prescribed action has its origin in the Vedas, and the Vedas proceed from the Indestructible (God); hence the all-pervading Infinite is always present in sacrifice. (3:15)

The section ‘rain ensues from sacrifice’ is interesting. Swami Chinmayananda sees the word ‘rain’ as symbolic as well as literal. He interprets the symbolism to mean the conditions favourable for any field to produce the profit (just as rain supplies the conditions favourable for a farm field to produce a crop). He writes: “Self-dedicated activities (yajna), when performed in any given field of endeavour, will be creating therein the conditions necessary for the field to smile forth in a luxurious ‘crop of profit’, for society to enjoy.”⁵

Continue performing action

Arjuna, the person who does not follow the wheel of creation thus set, going in this world (i.e. does not perform their duties), lives in vain sinfully and sensually. (3:16)

⁵ *The Holy Geeta*, Commentary by Swami Chinmayananda, Central Chinmaya Mission Trust, Mumbai

The person, however, who takes delight in the Spirit alone and is gratified with the Spirit, and is contented in the Spirit, has no duty. (3:17)

In this world, that great soul has no use whatsoever for things done or for things not done, nor has selfish dependence of any kind on any creature. (3:18)

Therefore, go on efficiently doing your duty without attachment. Doing work without attachment, a person attains the Supreme. (3:19)

Sri Krishna is telling Arjuna that the person who has attained the highest – the realization of oneness with the Supreme – no longer has any duties to perform, but he also lets Arjuna know in no uncertain terms that he is not there yet, so he must continue doing his duties. However, he promises that if Arjuna can do those duties without attachment, he can attain the Supreme. The interesting thing is that those ‘great souls’ Sri Krishna is talking about, though having ‘. . . no use whatsoever for things done or for things not done’, do participate in work for the benefit of others. One reason is so that they set a good example for those around them.

Following the lead of the righteous

Leaders should set a good example for others through their selfless service. Here Sri Krishna introduces Arjuna to the principle of leaders, such as himself, setting a good example to others who need to work at their duty, so that they will follow in the right path.

It is through action (without attachment) alone that Janaka and other wise people reached perfection. Having an eye to the maintenance of the world order, you too should take to action. (3:20)

Janaka was a great king of ancient times who dedicated himself completely to the welfare of his subjects and the community over which he ruled. He was a real-life example

of unselfish dedication to duty for them all. He was the father of Sita, who was the perfect wife of Sri Rama, and certainly followed her father's good example. Sri Krishna is really telling Arjuna that he is a prince and a great warrior, and everybody looks up to him, so it is his duty to set a good example for them.

Because whatever a great person does, that very thing other people also do; whatever standard that person sets up, the generality of people follow the same. (3:21)

Sri Krishna is implying, "What sort of an example are you going to set if you walk off the battlefield and disappear into the forest? You are a great man, this is admitted by all, but because of your example all the others will walk away from their duties." To underline this point Sri Krishna, speaking as an incarnation of God, says, "I set a good example, I work hard to hold the whole universe together":

Arjuna, there is nothing in all the three worlds for Me to do, nor is there anything worth attaining unattained by Me, yet I continue to work. (3:22)

Should I not engage in action, scrupulously at any time, great harm will come to the world; for, Arjuna, people follow My way in all matters. (3:23)

If I cease to act, these worlds will perish, I would prove to be the cause of confusion, and of the destruction of these people. (3:24)

Sri Krishna comes once again to the subject of working without attachment, but there is a little twist to it here:

Arjuna, just as the unwise people act with attachment, so should the wise person, seeking to help maintain the world order, act without attachment. (3:25)

The ordinary person says, "I'm not going to do any work unless I get money for it, or at least plenty of praise." Sri Krishna now tells Arjuna to let that person continue with

this attitude of attachment, and to encourage them to work as hard as they can to get as much as they can:

A wise person established in the Self should not unsettle the mind of the ignorant people who are attached to action, he or she should get them to perform all their duties, but should also continue to perform his or her own duties with devotion and without attachment. (3:26)

Ordinary people should first and foremost be encouraged to keep up the action, then maybe after a while the idea of doing at least some of the action for unselfish reasons will dawn on them. This is most likely to start if a person sees the leader ‘performing his or her duties with devotion and without attachment’.

Most people, if you talk to them about the selfless service of karma yoga, will think you are crazy or devious. *Sattvic* or unselfish and socially beneficial people will understand. They will say, “Yes, we should give all we can for the welfare of the world, and it will be better for us all.” The *rajasic* or egotistical, personally ambitious person will say, “What! Work for nothing? That’s ridiculous! I will work if I can get plenty of money, praise or fame.” The *tamasic* or ignorant, irrational and lazy person will suspiciously say, “I don’t know what your racket is, but I know you are trying to exploit me somehow; probably to get me to work for nothing so that you can get benefit from it and fill your pockets.”

So what Sri Krishna is advising is to encourage the tamasic person by making sure he is always rewarded for the effort he puts in, and maybe making it clear he’s disadvantaged when he doesn’t. Encourage the rajasik person to continue in his self-centred activities. Don’t preach to him about karma yoga, it has no meaning for him, but set him a good example yourself. When you have a person who is moving up from rajas into sattwa, you can encourage him to act selflessly in the world and facilitate his doing so. He will understand what you are talking about.

The interesting thing is that the people who are the best benefactors of the world are most probably the millions of ordinary individuals who give their best for other people and the community in their local area, and who don't even see themselves as sacrificing. It's just natural for them; it's what they naturally do.

8

Meditation

At the end of Chapter 5, Sri Krishna introduces us to the subject of meditation:

Shutting out all thoughts of external enjoyments, with the gaze fixed on the space between the eyebrows, having regulated the prana (outgoing) and the apana (ingoing) breaths flowing within the nostrils, he who has brought his senses, mind and intellect under control – such a contemplative soul intent on liberation and free from desire, fear and anger, is ever liberated. (5:27–28)

The first part of this instruction serves to remind us that the fundamental basis of these techniques is to go within by dissociating our awareness from the things of the outside world. You do not do this by concentrating on those things and trying to blot them out of your awareness. That's like the old joke, "Try not to think of an elephant." The harder you try not to think about it, the more the thought of an elephant dominates your awareness. You do it by concentrating on something within such as the space between the eyebrows, *chidakasha*, the screen on which we have internal visualizations, as Sri Krishna recommends here. You may also choose other concentration points such as a mantra, or a vision, which may be devotional such as your concept of God, guru or Jesus, and so on, or any other entity of your choosing, even something simple like the flow of the natural breath.

Sri Krishna goes on to say: “Having regulated the prana (outgoing) and the apana (ingoing) breaths flowing within the nostrils . . .” This reminds us of two requirements for best quality meditation: one is to try to balance the flow of the breath in the two nostrils as we have mentioned before, and the other is to develop a regular rhythm between inhalation and exhalation. These are accomplished by yogic techniques such as neti and nadi shodhana pranayama.

If you don’t go within you’ll go without

Chapter 6 deals with meditation. All of the activities which we have dealt with so far are done with the eyes open and have us very much involved with the outside world. The teachings of the *Gita* require us to maintain one-pointed awareness of what is happening in our world, and this can be greatly improved by practising some of the closed-eye techniques. In addition to that, we can’t get very far in our spiritual life unless we become friends with the mind and learn to gently control it.

One must elevate – and not degrade – oneself by one’s own mind. The mind is one’s friend as well as one’s enemy. (6:5)

The mind is the friend of those who have control over it, and the mind acts as an enemy for those who do not control it. (6:6)

Swami Sivananda comments that the lower mind, meaning the impure mind, is your real enemy because it binds you to *samsara*, the wheel of deaths and rebirths. However, the higher mind or the sattwic, pure mind is your real friend because it helps you in the attainment of *moksha*, liberation.

One who has control over the lower self – the mind, senses and body – is tranquil in heat and cold, in pleasure and pain, and in honour and dishonour, and remains ever steadfast with the Supreme Self. (6:7)

Sri Krishna talks a lot about the desirability of equanimity, and we have discussed many ways in which that equanimity

can be attained. Controlling the turbulent mind with meditation practices is also an important way to do it. Remember the words of Swami Satyananda when dealing with this: “There has to be progressive movement towards harmony in both the external and internal worlds. Internal problems must be progressively erased from the subconscious mind . . . and there are a large number of techniques for clearing out the mind and inducing tranquillity.”

Swami Niranjana, in a lecture at Mangrove Mountain Ashram in Australia, told us how this progresses: “According to the yogic literature, meditation becomes the means to overcome the pain of suffering. In our yogic sadhana, we eventually confront the ego in meditation. However, in the beginning, we deal with our mental expressions and behaviours; then we deal with our attitudes and aspirations; then we deal with our weaknesses and strengths; then we deal with our instincts, and after that we deal with our ego; and then we attain realization. This is the sequence of meditation. We cannot hope to achieve realization without having dealt with the other components. We have to deal with them. It is like clearing the ground.”

These are the stages, and they begin from simple awareness of our mind and behaviour. However, in the *Gita*, Sri Krishna is talking about meditation as being the means for an individual who is on the verge of enlightenment, who is no longer attracted to the things and activities of the world, but simply wants to go into isolation and attain realization.

He who does his duty without expecting the fruit of actions is a sannyasi (samkhya yogi) and a yogi (karma yogi) both. One does not become a sannyasi (renouncer) just because he has renounced the sacred fire, or become a yogi just because he has given up all activity. (6:1)

Arjuna has said at the beginning of Chapter 2 that it would be better for him to give up the fight and go begging on the

streets, but Sri Krishna told him that is not the right thing for him to do, he must act according to his dharma. When is the time right for a person to give up the world and go into deep meditation? When is the person ready to renounce the world? Arjuna said before, “I don’t want to kill all these people so I will leave the things of the world and become a renunciate.” Sri Krishna implied, “You are not ready for that.” When is a person ready?

Sannyasa is no other than yoga; for none becomes a yogi who has not given up thoughts of the world. (6:2)

To the contemplative soul who desires to climb to the heights of karma yoga, disinterested action is spoken of as the stepping stone; for the same person, when he is established in yoga, absence of all thoughts of the world is said to be the way to blessedness. (6:3)

When to renounce the world and when to withdraw

Thus it is not just a matter of deciding to get away from the world because it is giving you a bad time, you can only leave it when you have truly lost all interest in it. It is not escapism that is required; it is non-interest in all aspects of the world.

When a person ceases to have any attachment either for the objects of senses or for actions, and has renounced all thoughts of the world, he is said to have climbed to the heights of yoga. (6:4)

At the lowest level of tamas there is no meaningful action, not even selfish action. What to do? The person should move up into action with attachment. Some people at this level may believe they have reached the top level of no interest in the things of the world, because their motivation is so poor, but if you start rewarding them for minor efforts, you will see their attachment to them develop very quickly. This is exactly what they need; to be conditioned to act in the world by becoming attached to rewards for their actions. In this way

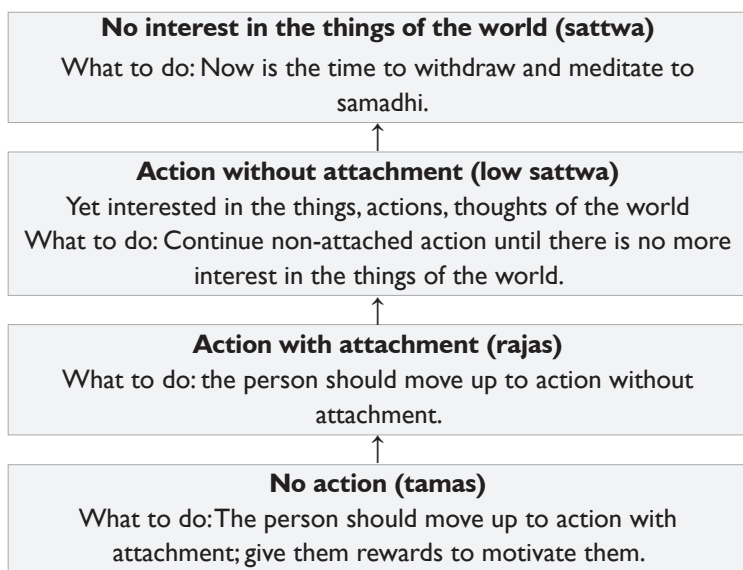
they move up from tamas into the rajasic level of action with attachment. All those things we have been discussing about non-attachment do not apply to the person who is under the ongoing influence of tamas; the idea of selfless service is meaningless to them.

The rajasic person already attached should develop the attitude of service to the world, and as Sri Krishna tells us, another person who is in that higher level of unattached service can set a good example for such a person. The rajasic person sees that it is a nice way to live. The dawning of this new attitude may arise in them because they have evolved from getting any happiness in the satisfaction of their desires. Other ways in which this attitude may develop in these people are through their yoga practices, spiritual study such as studying the *Gita*, practising their religion, having a mentor, or meeting their guru. There are many ways. However, as they move up into the lower levels of sattwa, selfless service and non-attachment make more and more sense to them.

For the person who acts in an unattached way, but is still interested in the things of the world, what should that person do? Continue with actions until he or she eventually loses all interest in or thoughts about the world. Then when they have no further interest in the things of the world, it is the right time to withdraw and meditate in order to attain samadhi.

What happens after that? After reaching realization, you come 'back to earth', you still have a functioning body, and you think, 'What do I do now?' You come back into the world and continue to act there until the body expires, but you are acting in a completely detached and disinterested (yet non-neurotic) way. Swami Satyananda is a good example of this. Through such detached action, the contribution one makes to the world is a much higher one.

To illustrate these levels of action and renunciation, we can look at it in this way. Read this up from the bottom, or lowest level:



When one is in solitude, one has to manage the mind. Sri Krishna now goes on to the principles of controlling the mind; he talks about making a friend of the mind, and to make a friend of the mind you must get to know it.

Control of the mind

The yogi whose mind is sated with jnana (knowledge of nirguna Brahman) and vijnana (knowledge of manifest divinity), who is unmoved under any circumstances, whose senses are completely mastered, and to whom earth, stone and gold are all alike, is spoken of as a God-realized soul. (6:8)

The person who has the same attitude towards well-wishers and neutrals as well as mediators, friends and foes, relatives and objects of hatred, the virtuous and the sinful with the same eye, stands supreme. (6:9)

Meditation

Now Sri Krishna gives us a method of how to meditate, how to prepare the place, how to sit, and to become

completely absorbed in God, total one-pointed awareness on the Supreme Spirit. Each time the mind wanders, bring it back.

Living in seclusion all alone, the yogi who has controlled his mind and body, and is free from desires and void of possessions, should constantly engage his mind in meditation. (6:10)

Having firmly placed his seat in a spot which is free from dirt and other impurities with the sacred kusha grass, a deerskin and a cloth spread thereon one below another (kusha below, deerskin in the middle and cloth uppermost), neither very high nor very low. (6:11)

And occupying that seat, concentrating the mind and controlling the functions of the mind and senses, he should practise yoga for self-purification, (6:12)

Holding the trunk, head and neck straight and steady, remaining firm and fixing the gaze on the tip of his nose, without looking in other directions, (6:13)

Firm in the vow of complete chastity and fearless, remaining perfectly calm, and with the mind held in restraint and fixed on Me, the vigilant yogi should sit absorbed in Me. (6:14)

Thus constantly applying his mind to Me, the yogi of disciplined mind attains the everlasting peace, consisting of supreme bliss, which abides in Me. (6:15)

This meditation technique is a typically devotional one, one that would be performed by such a disciple of Sri Krishna as Arjuna. A Christian may fix his or her mind and internal vision on Jesus or the Virgin Mary, followers of other religions on their figures of inspiration or saints, disciples of a guru on that guru, and so on. Of course the kusha grass and deerskin are not essential ingredients nowadays, but would have been typical of the meditation seat used in the days and region in which this part of the *Gita* was written.

Moderation

Sri Krishna tells us that to meditate effectively we must be moderate in our habits:

Arjuna, this yoga is neither for one who overeats, nor for one who observes a complete fast; it is neither for one who is given to too much sleep, nor even for one who is ceaselessly awake. (6:16)

Yoga, which rids one of woe, is accomplished only by the person who is moderate in diet and recreation, moderate in performing actions, and moderate in sleep and wakefulness. (6:17)

When the mind which is thoroughly disciplined gets riveted on God alone, then the person who is free from yearning for all enjoyments is said to be established in yoga. (6:18)

The quiet mind

As a flame does not flicker in a windless place, such is stated to be the picture of the disciplined mind of the yogi practising meditation on God. (6:19)

The state in which the mind becomes still, curbed through the practice of yoga, and in which, realizing God through subtle reason (purified by meditation on God) the soul rejoices only in God. (6:20)

Completely renouncing all desires arising from thoughts of the world, and fully restraining the whole pack of the senses from all sides by the time, the person should through gradual practice attain tranquillity; and fixing the mind on God through reason controlled by steadfastness, he should not think of anything else. (6:24–25)

Drawing back the restless and fidgety mind from all those objects after which it runs, the person should repeatedly fix it on God. (6:26)

This chapter of the *Gita*, and indeed the whole book, contains many descriptions of the state of the person who

is at a high level of evolvment. That is good, but hardly anybody is in that state, many of us are just at the beginning, and the rest have not even thought about beginning because we don't even know how to begin. So what does meditation hold for the ordinary person? A lot!

What does meditation hold for the ordinary person?

We may consider the three initial stages of the meditation practices:

1. Entering
2. Concentrating inside
3. Cleansing the unconscious mind.

Let us deal with each one in order:

1. Entering

This stage is called *pratyahara*. It is the fundamental experience that is central to all the practices of meditation, and it forms the substratum for them all. Put simply, *pratyahara* is our closing off to external perceptions by ignoring them, and opening up to internal experiences by letting them come into our awareness. It is the foundation of meditation. It is the state of disconnection (or dissociation) of the awareness from the sensory channels. The senses continue to function in *pratyahara*, but the awareness is not connected with them. You are just not aware of them.

Benefits of pratyahara: Although *pratyahara* is an important transitional phase on the way to meditation, *pratyahara* practices in themselves bring great benefits because they bring us into a peaceful, relaxed state, free from the activities of the world. For example, *pratyahara*:

- Gives the ability to disconnect and rest the body and mind, which is of great benefit.
- Is a deeply relaxing state.
- Is useful for many health practices.
- Can be used for personal development techniques, such as learning, etc.
- Develops the witness position, because fundamental to

pratyahara is that we are ‘just observing’, first of all the outer activities, then the inner.

- Is the threshold of the subconscious and unconscious levels of the mind, allowing us to:
 - Put in positive affirmations (the sankalpa) or information e.g. learn a language.
 - Bring up old memories that are keeping us down. This discharges their negative emotions.

Pratyahara is also the ‘gateway’ to the superconscious, and as we eliminate the unconscious impressions or *samskaras* that clutter up our field of awareness, the experiences of the superconscious shine through. These are the psychic and spiritual levels.

2. Concentrating inside

We are ‘inside’ – where do we go? The directions we can take from here are usually considered to be two, which may be named: concentrative meditation, or *dharana*, and opening-up meditation.

i) *Concentrative meditation*

- In dharana we try to focus the awareness on one point, and exclude all inputs. This is the method outlined by Sri Krishna and by Sage Patanjali in his *Yoga Sutras*.
- In Satyananda Yoga it includes:
 - Mantra yoga
 - *Ajapa japa*: awareness of the breath mantra
 - Guided inner visualization
 - Trataka.

ii) *Opening-up meditation*

- Remain open to any input such as thoughts, sounds, emotions, etc., but try to observe them as an impartial witness or observer, and to allow them to pass without becoming involved in them
- In Satyananda Yoga this includes:
 - *Antar mouna*: awareness and manipulation of thoughts
 - *Chidakasha dharana*: spontaneous inner visualization.

The key to these concentration practices is that when the mind wanders off the point of concentration, which it will, just bring it back and continue concentrating. When it wanders away again, again bring it back, and each time, bring it back kindly and patiently.

These two meditational directions are not exclusive of each other; both may be required. Indeed, we can't hold the higher levels of concentrative meditation, meaning dhyana and samadhi, until we have predominantly cleared the lower mind, because its disturbances force themselves into our awareness when we are trying to concentrate. However, once we have cleared the ground and 'paved the way', we can then ascend to the highest level of consciousness.

3. Cleansing the unconscious mind

Here is where the meditation practices really come into their own, because meditation clears out repressed mental conflicts in the unconscious mind and memory, *chitta*, and neutralizes the emotions that are attached to them. Many of us have had so many of these mind-cleansing experiences that we have come to realize that meditation is a great gift for the world. As the attached emotions are neutralized, the old memories lose their power to hold us back and we are freed from their 'weight' forever.

Why is yoga such a mind-purifying process? As mentioned above, our *samskaras*, the repressed memories of many of our past experiences, carry with them an unconscious emotional charge. They block our ability to evolve to our highest potential, as well as being detrimental to our ongoing moods and mental states and the way we interact with our world. If we are to grow, we must neutralize their power.

The majority of the physical techniques of yoga help to bring our deeply hidden memories into our awareness, and their attached emotions come to the surface of the mind. Then the meditation practices give the memories a screen on to which they are projected so that we can become aware of them.

It seems that what we are doing in meditation is dis-empowering the old samskaras by resurrecting the repressed memories when we are in the deeply relaxed state of the witness. Resurrection of the memory then makes it 'pliable'; it can be transformed by associating it with disinterested relaxation rather than the old destructive emotion. It can then be 're-remembered', but this time via the relaxed and neutral memory route rather than the stressful adrenalin-noradrenalin route. It then ceases to have power over us forever. Thus meditation is:

- Descendent: to clear the lower mind
- Ascendent: to progressively experience inner peace and realize our higher levels of evolution
- Transcendent: to attain enlightenment.

Eyes closed, eyes open

One great beauty of these meditation practices is that the skills we develop with the eyes closed can be used all day with the eyes open. We need to approach our karma yogic life with a relaxed mind and body, one-pointed awareness, the witness-awareness position, and an unconscious mind as free as possible from the old emotionally-loaded samskaras. All of these skills are developed when we practise meditation techniques, so it is no wonder that instruction in meditation is such a fundamental part of the *Bhagavad Gita*.

9

The Three Qualities of Created Nature

In Chapter 14 entitled *The Yoga of the Division of the Three Gunas*, Sri Krishna gives us an introduction to the concept of the three qualities of created nature, the *gunas*, and this crucial subject goes all the way through the remaining four chapters of the *Bhagavad Gita*.

What are the *gunas*?

Purity, passion and inertia – these qualities, O Arjuna, born of Nature, bind the spirit in the body. (14:5)

From the beginning, Sri Krishna points out the mechanisms that cause the ‘real me’ or the Higher Self to be deluded by the identification with the body, thus becoming ‘bound’ to it. The further implication is that as soon as one can disassociate, or dis-identify, with the body by transcending these three qualities, one experiences freedom and liberation known as *moksha*.

Of these, sattwa, which from its stainlessness is the luminous and healthy quality, binds by attachment to happiness and by attachment to knowledge. (14:6)

Rajas is of the nature of passion, the source of thirst for sensual enjoyment and attachment; it binds fast, O Arjuna, the embodied one by attachment to the rewards of our actions. (14:7)

Tamas is born of ignorance, deluding all embodied beings; it binds fast, by heedlessness, indolence and sleep. (14:8)

Sattwa drives one to joy and rajas to action; while tamas, clouding wisdom, incites one to error as well as sleep and sloth. (14:9)

It should be realized that these qualities apply to all aspects of nature; however, in the *Gita*, because he is dealing with the quirks of Arjuna's personality, Sri Krishna applies it to the human personality and tendencies at all levels. It clearly describes the different levels of evolvement of the various thinking and behavioural states of human beings, and how the gunas stop us from realizing our spiritual potential. For instance, sattwa, when it is our predominant quality at the time, influences us towards purity, happiness and knowledge; rajas, when it is the more active quality, influences us towards the passionate pursuit of satisfying our desires for sensual enjoyment, whereas tamas, which stems from ignorance, influences us towards laziness, sleep and heedlessness – for example, not heeding the needs of others.

Overpowering rajas and tamas, sattwa prevails; overpowering sattwa and tamas, rajas prevails; and in the same way, overpowering sattwa and rajas, tamas prevails. (14:10)

These qualities variously influence each one of us from time to time. Sometimes a person will be under the influence of sattwa, and at that time our perceptions of the world and the individuals around us, our thinking, our emotions and our tendencies to behave in certain ways will have the sattvic qualities about them. At other times these aspects will be influenced by the rajasic qualities, and at other times they will be under the influence of tamas. We are a mixture of these three, and we are literally pushed from this side to that as the tides of the three gunas dominate our lives, but most of us spend most of our lives mainly under the sway of one of these gunas.

However, at times, though we are customarily under rajas or even sattwa, we can crash down into tamas and get stuck

there for a time because of adverse circumstances in our lives, and this is exactly what happened to Arjuna.

From the point of view of the yogis, the preferable influence is that of sattwa; it is the most evolved level and closest to the highest level of our being, producing our greatest progress and happiness. Therefore, the main thrust of yoga is to clear the blockages that are keeping us down in the lower levels and spend more and more time living under the influence of sattwa. This was also the task of Sri Krishna as he dispensed the yogic psychotherapy to Arjuna, the warrior under stress.

When light and discernment dawn in this body, as well as in the mind and senses, then one should know that sattwa is predominant. (14:11)

With the preponderance of rajas, Arjuna, greed, activity, undertaking of action with a selfish motive, restlessness and a thirst for enjoyment make their appearance. (14:12)

With the growth of tamas, Arjuna, obtuseness (slowness to understand) of the mind and senses, disinclination to perform one's obligatory duties, frivolity and stupor – all these appear. (14:13)

Of course these are not absolute; if we say a person is sattwic it means that the sattwic qualities are predominant in him or her. Even in the most sattwic person, at times the rajasic or even tamasic qualities may predominate. A person who is predominantly under the influence of rajas may be influenced by and manifest the qualities of sattwa or tamas at times. Even a predominantly tamasic person may manifest rajasic or even sattwic qualities from time to time.

The moment of death

If the embodied one meets with death when sattwa is predominant, then he attains to all spotless worlds of the knowers of the Highest. (14:14)

Meeting death in rajas, he is born among those who are attached to action; and dying in tamas, he is born from the womb of the senseless. (14:15)

Like attracts like; we are reborn into a family and environment at the same level of evolvement from which we left when we died. Presumably our existence between death and rebirth will be at that level too, and the other souls with whom we associate will be at that level. Heaven and hell may not be actual places, but they certainly may be states of existence when we are without a body, as well as being apt descriptions of states we experience here on earth.

The reward of a righteous act, they say, is sattvic and faultless (in the shape of joy, wisdom and dispassion, etc.); sorrow is declared to be the fruit of a rajasic act and ignorance, the fruit of a tamasic act. (14:16)

Wisdom follows from sattwa, greed undoubtedly follows from rajas; likewise obstinacy, error, stupor and also ignorance follow from tamas. (14:17)

Progress or regress

Those who are seated in sattwa go upwards; the rajasic dwell in the middle; and the tamasic, abiding in the function of the lowest guna, go downwards. (14:18)

When people are experiencing the sattvic, they are at one with the qualities within them: they are at one with the love, the power, the joy and security that they already are. This gives them a very positive frame of mind which results in two outcomes, firstly they relate to other people in a good way, and secondly they don't feel dependent on the world to get what they need, because they experience it within themselves.

So from a good, sattvic relationship with other people, things simply continue to improve – no hurting, no demands – 'If I help you, you will usually help me.' Thus the virtuous

circle grows as we raise each other up. Under the influence of tamas I hurt you because I feel hurt and deprived, then you hurt me back, and the vicious circle grows as we drag each other down. In sattwa we have virtuous circles uplifting our life, and in tamas we have vicious circles corrupting our life. In rajas we get mixtures of these averaging out, so we generally stay at the rajasic level.

The gunas are a model of our level of evolvment. As we evolve up into sattwa, we experience and realize our higher qualities that are already a part of us, such as oneness and union, security, joy, ecstasy, positive sense of self, love, intimacy of relationships, and higher knowledge. We then come to realize more and more that we don't need to get these from outside ourselves, so we become less and less attached to the things of the world; the greed, lust, anger and all the other destructive ways in which we can deal with other people and our world don't exist. While we are still under the influence of rajas, and especially tamas, we are still addicted to those things and people.

A yogic viewpoint of addictions sees that in those lower states the experience of our higher qualities are covered over by the samskaras and karmas within us. The substance or activity to which we have become addicted neutralizes or 'anaesthetizes' the distress of those blockages for a time and we experience the higher states to some extent. However, the experience doesn't last, and when the 'anaesthetic' effect wears off the distress reasserts itself, often worse than it did in the first place. Then we remember how much better we felt when we were experiencing the substance or activity, and we develop a craving for it. However, what we are really craving is not the substance or activity, but the experience of our own inherent higher states. The obvious solution to the problem is not to take in something that puts the samskaras to sleep for a while, but to get rid of the samskaras for good. That is the task that yoga performs so well.

When we consider Sri Krishna's descriptions of people under the predominant influence of rajas and tamas, we

are struck by the negative descriptions he gives of them. One may consider that he has done this deliberately to make them stand out in stark relief as compared with the sattwic properties. However, if we look at the gunas from a wider perspective, we can see positive qualities if used in the right way. For instance with rajas, planning, dynamism and activity can be sublimated for higher purposes, as can the expectation of outcomes that forms such an integral part of rajas. Even qualities of tamas can be directed in appropriate directions; the inertia and sleepiness can be well-earned rest, the stuck-ness can be stability or firmness when required, the apathy can be equanimity, and the stubbornness can become fortitude.

So the gunas 'colour' everything they influence with qualities, some of which are:

1. **Sattwa** – The state of truth, simplicity and equanimity in action:
 - Purity
 - Balance, light, clear perception, simplicity
 - The essence of learning and awakening
 - Seeking and getting knowledge
 - Vision is looking for opportunities to help
 - Thinking is accurate, intuitive, wise
 - Emotions are positive, based on faith
 - Aspiration is altruistic and ethical
 - Activities are performed for the good of all
 - Leads to the enlightenment of our true state.
2. **Rajas** – The state of dynamism and activity, combined with full ego involvement:
 - Passion
 - The basis of all movement and planning in the world, body and mind
 - It is momentum, change, movement, power, force and restlessness
 - Personal vision is opportunistic
 - Thinking is rational and adequate
 - Emotions are positive if everything is going well

- Personal ambition, ego, effort, drive
 - Activities are performed to fulfil desires and ambitions.
3. **Tamas** – The state of inertia and ignorance:
- Inertia
 - Stability, lethargy, laziness
 - Fatigue, dullness, apathy, feeling stuck
 - Impurity, disease, ignorance, darkness
 - Vision is limited to a primitive level of survival
 - Thinking is illogical, bigoted, may be fanatical
 - Emotions are negative, based on survival
 - Actions are defensive, may be harmful
 - Probability of change to improve is blocked because tamas is ‘stuck-ness’
 - BUT don’t condemn people who are stuck in tamas, as one doesn’t know what life experiences they have had. See their potential.

When the seer perceives no agent other than the three gunas, and realizes Me, the Supreme Spirit standing entirely beyond these gunas, he enters into My Being. (14:19)

Having transcended the aforesaid three gunas which have caused the body, and freed from birth, death, old age and all kinds of sorrow, this soul attains supreme bliss. (14:20)

Qualities of the person who has transcended the three gunas

Arjuna said:

What are the marks of the person who has transcended the three qualities, O Lord? What is his conduct and how does he go beyond these three qualities? (14:21)

What are the qualities of a person who has transcended the three gunas? How does that person act, how does that person behave towards others, how does the person live? And what methods can we ourselves adopt to transcend the three gunas? Here is another one of those questions Arjuna asks Sri Krishna about the qualities of the evolved person. They

give Sri Krishna the opportunity to once again tell us what we can become. Sri Krishna elaborates on the qualities and behaviour of such a person and how we can attain that state:

One who transcends the mode of material Nature, neither hates the presence of enlightenment, activity, and delusion nor desires them when they are absent, (14:22)

Who remains like a witness without being affected by the modes (gunas) of material Nature (Prakriti); and stays firmly attached to the Lord without wavering – knowing that it is only the modes of material Nature (gunas) that are operating, (14:23)

One who depends on the Lord, and is indifferent to pain and pleasure; to whom a clod, a stone, and gold are alike; to whom the dear and the unfriendly are alike; who is of firm mind; who is calm in censure and in praise, (14:24)

And who is indifferent to honour and disgrace, is impartial to friend and foe, and has renounced the sense of doership. (14:25)

Notice here that Sri Krishna is speaking of ‘the Lord’ in the grammatical third person again, but in just the next verse he goes back to the first person.

Transcending the gunas by service and devotional love of the Lord

One who offers service to Me with love and unswerving devotion transcends the three modes of material Nature and becomes fit for Brahma Nirvana, (14:26)

Because I am the basis of the immortal Eternal Being (Brahman), of everlasting order (dharma), and of the absolute bliss (ananda). (14:27)

In these verses Sri Krishna gives us the final instruction on how to transcend the gunas and reach our final realization: love and serve the Lord with unswerving devotion.

The Demonic and the Divine

In Chapter 16, *The Yoga of the Division between the Divine and the Demonic*, Sri Krishna gives an overview of the characteristics of people at the highest spiritual level, who he calls the divine people, and those at the lowest level, who he calls the demonic. The divine individuals are at the height of the sattwic level, and the demonic are at low tamasic level, but of course most people function somewhere between the two. Sri Krishna said:

There are two types of human beings in this world, the divine and the demonic. (16:6)

Every translation of the *Bhagavad Gita* I have seen uses some combination of these words: “. . . two types of human beings in this world, the divine and the demonic.” I don’t believe this fits with the reality of what most people are. There are not many divine people in the world, that is, those who correspond with Sri Krishna’s description, and there are not many absolute demons among us. Surely Sri Krishna is implying, “There are two types of tendencies humans have, the divine tendency and the demonic tendency.”

Swami Niranjan suggested this interpretation in his lectures held at Mangrove Mountain Ashram: “These are the two main extremes of our natures. For a human being the option is to either go the divine way or go the demonic way. These are the only two directions . . . You have to strive to go

the divine way, so that you remain connected with truth, with righteousness and with purity.”

The divine qualities

The Blessed Lord said:

The following qualities belong to the person born for a divine state, O Arjuna: fearlessness, purity of heart, steadfastness in knowledge and yoga; alms-giving, control of the senses, sacrifice, study of scriptures, austerity and straightforwardness, harmlessness, truth, absence of anger, renunciation, peacefulness, absence of crookedness, compassion towards beings, non-covetousness, gentleness, modesty, absence of fickleness, vigour, forgiveness, fortitude, purity, absence of hatred and absence of pride. (16:1–3)

Swami Sivananda wrote: “The ‘divine wealth’ or *daivi sampat* consists of these twenty-six attributes. This is a rare gift from the Lord. It is an inexhaustible wealth that cannot be taken away by dacoits (a gang of armed robbers). This helps the aspirant attain the imperishable and immaculate Brahmic seat.”

Swami Sivananda’s 18 ITIES correspond with these qualities:

Serenity, regularity, absence of vanity,
Sincerity, simplicity, veracity,
Equanimity, fixity, non-irritability,
Adaptability, humility, tenacity,
Integrity, nobility, magnanimity,
Charity, generosity, purity.

Many aspirants concentrate on one of these in succession each day, week or month, and try to attain that state. One could do so also with Sri Krishna’s ‘26 Attributes of Divine Wealth’.

The demonic qualities

Then Sri Krishna deals with the demonic, and he doesn’t say very nice things about them, but there are certainly people in the world who are as he describes:

Hypocrisy, arrogance, self-conceit, anger, harshness and ignorance belong to one who is born for a demonic state. (16:4)

The divine qualities lead to liberation, and the demonic qualities lead to bondage; but don't worry Arjuna, because you are born with the divine endowment. (16:5)

Swami Sivananda calls these the six demonic qualities. It is interesting to note how the two qualities of ignorance and arrogance so often occur together in the same person.

The demonic know not what to do and what to refrain from; neither purity, nor right conduct nor truth is found in them. (16:7)

They say, 'This universe is without truth, without a moral basis, without a God.' Holding this view, these ruined souls of small intellect and fierce deeds, are the enemies of the world for its destruction. (16:8-9)

They work with impure motives, filled with insatiable desires, full of hypocrisy, pride and arrogance, and holding evil ideas through delusion, (16:10)

Obsessed with immeasurable cares ending only with death, regarding gratification of lust as their highest aim, and feeling sure that that is all. (16:11)

They have the trio of greed, sexual lust and power hunger, the tamasic levels of the lower three chakras of mooladhara, swadhisthana and manipura, in abundance:

Bound by a hundred ties of hope, given over to lust and anger, they strive to obtain by unlawful means hoards of wealth for sensual enjoyments. (16:12)

'This has been gained by me today; this desire of mine I shall fulfil; this is mine and this wealth also shall be mine in future.' (16:13)

'That enemy has been slain by me; and others also I shall slay. I am the lord. I enjoy. I am perfect, powerful and happy.' (16:14)

Even their deeds, which may appear noble, are done wrongly and performed for their own gratification:

'I am rich and born in a noble family. Who else is equal to me? I shall perform sacrifices. I shall give (charity). I shall rejoice.' Thus deluded by ignorance, (16:15)

Bewildered by many fantasies, entangled in the snare of delusion, addicted to the gratification of lust, they fall into a foul hell. (16:16)

Actually, their life is a hell, their existence after death is a hell, and their next life is a hell. One of the problems with *tamas* is the 'stuckness', the difficulty in getting out of it. This is no doubt contributed to by the vicious circles of behaviour and response – bad *karmas* – that are the curse of *tamas*. It is a life of exploiting other people for lust, cheating people for material possessions, and ongoing power hunger, anger and vengeance. As mentioned above, those three problem areas cause the trouble: greed from *mooladhara chakra*, lust from *swadhisthana*, power hunger from *manipura*, and the anger that results when the demands of those are frustrated.

What hope do these people have of coming out of this awful lifestyle? Life after life of suffering leads gradually to the realization that when they hurt others it rebounds on them, and that a better result comes from the cooperation of *rajas*, and even better, but much later after many lifetimes, the oneness and generosity of *sattwa*.

What happens to the demonic person when their body dies?

The demonic after death

Like attracts like, as the sayings go: 'Like fish swim together', 'Birds of a feather flock together'. This applies even when we have a body, but in a body we can sometimes get away from the other demons. However, when we are in the non-physical state, the like entities are inexorably drawn together, so that after death we are in the environment appropriate

to our natural state, keeping company with other souls of like propensity. For the pure individual it is heaven, for the demonic individual it is the ‘foul hell’ Sri Krishna refers to. Then to make it worse, they are reborn into appropriate hellish environments. What does Sri Krishna have to say about this?

Intoxicated by wealth and honour, those self-conceited and haughty individuals worship God through nominal sacrifices for ostentation without following the sacred rituals. (16:17)

Given over to egotism, brute force, arrogance, lust and anger, etc., and calumnizing (defaming) others, they hate Me (the inner controller of all) dwelling in their own bodies as well as in those of others. (16:18)

Those cruel haters, worst among the people of the world, I hurl those evil-doers into the womb of demons only. (16:19)

Entering into demonic wombs and deluded, birth after birth, not attaining Me, they thus fall, O Arjuna, into a condition still lower than that. (16:20)

The same horrible process over and over again. What is a ‘demonic womb’? At other places Sri Krishna talks about ‘evil wombs’, what are they? Here is an example: Imagine a woman who is heavily addicted to heroin during her pregnancy. Her blood is full of heroin during the pregnancy, so the nerve cells producing the opiate hormones, such as endorphins, developing in the foetus do not form correctly. This faulty development occurs because when a substance is supplied to a growing nervous system or endocrine system, the cells that are supposed to naturally secrete that substance or a version of it will not develop. As a result, those substances, such as endorphins which protect us from pain, both mental and emotional as well as physical during our life, are not produced in the baby. This baby is then born into a state akin to heroin withdrawal or some degree of it. That is a living hell, being vulnerable to all sorts of

emotional and physical pain, and the child is already a born heroin addict, just waiting to find the heroin.

To add to the distress of the developing baby in the womb, at times when the mother cannot get the heroin, she undergoes painful withdrawal effects, and so does the developing baby. The whole disaster is also made worse by the baby being born into the degraded environment in which the usual heroin addict lives.

Certainly, many people who are born into such difficult circumstances in this life will have been so due to the negative karmas of their previous lives, as Sri Krishna describes here. However, there is another possibility for some individuals. Many people who are ‘having a bad time’ in this life believe that is so because they had been very bad ‘sinners’ in the past, but that is not necessarily true. It may be the result of karmas, retrieved prior to this incarnation from the person’s *sanchita karma* or storehouse of previous karmas, being fructified into, and hopefully exhausted by, the difficult circumstances of this present incarnation. Maybe they (bravely) choose such a life before this incarnation to ‘hurry along’ their spiritual development. Then, if they can manage this difficult karma in this very life and learn from it, for example through yoga, it will be eliminated and have contributed immensely to their spiritual evolvment.

Lust, anger and greed

The gate of hell is threefold, destructive of the self – lust, anger and greed. Therefore one should abandon these three. (16:21)

People who are freed from these three gates of hell work their own salvation and thereby attain the Supreme Goal (i.e. God). (16:22)

These three main tendencies of greed, lust and power-hunger, the tamasic qualities belonging to the three lower chakras, as well as the anger that results from the frustration of these drag us down. Sri Krishna tells us we should abandon these three.

It's not easy at the beginning, but at least we can notice them, and realize the tendencies within us.

However, where do we get our guidelines for right behaviour? Sri Krishna says 'from the scriptures':

The person who ignores the scriptures, and acts under the impulse of desire, does not attain perfection, happiness or the Supreme Goal. (16:23)

Therefore, when determining what ought to be done and what ought not to be done, let the scriptures be the authority. Act here in this world according to the scriptures. (16:24)

We might add, "Let the *Bhagavad Gita* be one of the scriptures we use for our guidance", as it is a gem of an authority on righteous behaviour.

11

Lifestyles According to the Three Gunas

In Chapters 17 and 18 of the *Bhagavad Gita*, we again have a discussion based on the gunas and the degrees of our evolvment. If considered as three parts, the last third of the *Gita* deals with the gunas, the middle third is about the qualities of God, while the first third deals mainly with karma yoga as well as jnana, bhakti and a little of raja yoga.

From here on much of what Sri Krishna describes is now in terms of the three qualities: sattwic, rajasic and tamasic. These qualities constitute the lifestyles of people under the influence of the different gunas. We have four of these comparisons coming now, relating to faith, food, sacrifice and austerity, and plenty more in Chapter 18. It gives a very clear picture of the thinking and behaviour patterns of the different levels of society; from the spiritual and sattwic to the lowest tamasic levels, and all the people in the middle. Of course the examples Sri Krishna gives are appropriate to the time they were written millennia ago; however, this chapter will attempt to suggest equivalent examples within modern society.

By restating the last two verses of the previous chapter, once again Sri Krishna inspires Arjuna to think about himself and his own adherence to the scriptures, thus he introduces Chapter 17 by asking:

Those who perform sacrifice with faith, though they don't follow the rules of the scriptures, what is their condition, O Krishna? Is it sattva, rajas or tamas? (17:1)

Sri Krishna had just told Arjuna that he must obey the scriptures, to use them as his guidelines, and Arjuna asked, “What if you do sacrifice yourself, but not in accordance with the scriptures?” Recall that we are using the term ‘sacrifice’ in its widest personal and social sense. This gives an opportunity for Sri Krishna to give Arjuna, and us as well, much more information than the simple question asked.

Faith

Threefold is the faith of the embodied, which is inherent in their nature – the sattwic (pure), the rajasic (passionate) and the tamasic (dark). Thus hear of it. (17:2)

The faith of each person is in accordance with their nature, O Arjuna. The person consists of his faith; as one's faith is, so is he. (17:3)

What you have faith in is what you are. Where your beliefs lie determines how your world will be and how you will live in that world. For example, if you believe that people are basically good, your attitude and behaviour towards others will be very different from the person who believes that people are basically bad, and so will be their responses to you. If you believe that human beings are selfish and only interested in exploiting others for self-gain, which is the cynical attitude, you will have very different relationships with them. These relationships will have a negative quality, not only for you yourself, but in the responses of the people with whom you relate, and life will be a misery. The opposite is the case if you view people as worthy and basically good and encourage them in being that. As long as you are wise enough not to be exploited, your life will be a joy, full of warm human relationships.

Yoga takes this even further. According to the teachings of yoga, humans are not simply good by nature, they are *divine*. A person is, in essence, a spiritual being in a human body undergoing life's roles, which identifies with the body and the roles to a greater or lesser extent. No matter how a person acts due to this identification, he or she is always God-like at their centre. The yogi continually strives to 'see' that divinity in everyone.

As another example of one's faith and belief creating their world, if your faith convinces you of the existence of God, a Supreme Spirit, or whatever name you have for it, you will perceive your world in a different way than that of the non-believer. You will have different thought patterns, different characteristic emotions and different attitudes towards most of the elements of human life, and you will behave in a different way towards those elements as well. As mentioned before, the same attitude applies to faith in reincarnation, especially if it is based on you being convinced by personal experience.

Ethics is another example of the different attitudes dependent on one's prevailing guna. For the sattvic person, the golden rule, 'Do unto others as you would have them do unto you', is a real part of their life, and they can see the logic of it. For the rajasic person the golden rule is more like, 'The one who has the gold makes the rules', and for the defensive tamasic person their golden rule is something like, 'Do it to others before they do it to you!'

The sattvic or the pure people worship the gods; the rajasic people or the passionate worship the yakshas (beings of money) and the rakshasas (beings of power); the others (the tamasic or the deluded people) worship the ghosts and the hosts of the nature spirits. (17:4)

If you had two seminars happening side by side, one being, 'How to Become Rich and Famous', and the other being, 'How to Develop Your Compassion through Yoga', there

would be at least five hundred people at the seminar on riches, and fifty or less at the one on yoga. Run a major yoga seminar and see how many attendees arrive; even when the master comes, only eight hundred to one thousand arrive. Yet, how many people turn up at football matches? Many thousands of people turn up for an ‘important’ football game to see people pushing each other around with plenty of rough body contact. That is what rajas worships: power, fame, money, and the pursuit of other pleasures.

According to Sri Krishna, the tamasic people worship the ghosts and hosts of nature spirits. He’s not speaking of benevolent nature spirits; here the idea of ‘nature spirits’ implies worshipping the attainment of occult powers so that they can manipulate and maybe even harm other people, as happened in some cultures. They may have worshipped nature spirits in the past, whereas nowadays they may be at the football match or any available blood sport hoping for plenty of violence. Their idols, too – the people they worship – are tamasic: brutal gangsters, drug-addicted stage performers, singers of violent or nihilistic music, etc.

Food

What sort of food do people in each of these states prefer?

The food also which is dear to each is threefold, as also sacrifice, austerity and alms-giving. Hear these. (17:7)

In most societies, the majority of people are in the rajasic level. There are not as many in the tamasic level, and most unfortunately, not so many at the sattwic level. Some societies are predominantly tamasic, and some groups of people in other societies have evolved to the sattwic level. Here Sri Krishna describes the food preferences of each group.

The foods that are dear to the sattwic (pure) people, are those which increase life, purity, strength, health, joy and cheerfulness (good appetite), which are savoury and oleaginous, substantial and agreeable. (17:8)

Foods that are considered sattwic nowadays are vegetarian, with a significant amount of fresh organic fruit and vegetables. The fresh food vegan diet would be the most sattwic, usually enjoyed in a community of active people, though meditating monks would eat a much lighter diet than that. However, two warnings are due here.

1. **Sattwic precautions:** Firstly, vegetables should be cooked soft enough so that their cell walls are broken to release their nutrients. The cell walls are made of cellulose, and humans (unlike many other animals) don't have the enzyme in their gut to break down the cellulose. If they are not cooked enough, the intact cells go down to the large intestine where they are broken down by bacteria, too late for our nutrition, but just in time to be degraded by putrefying bacteria into antisocial gases.

Secondly, some exclusively vegetable and fruit-based diets are deficient in iron and vitamin B12. Both of these can lead to forms of anaemia, the former found in menstruating women, and the latter found more frequently as people age and begin to lose their ability to absorb what little vitamin B12 there is in that diet. People on vegan diets, especially if their food is not fully cooked, must watch out for these insidious complications when they reach middle age and later.

2. **Rajasic and tamasic precautions:** Another warning is due here. A light sattwic diet may be too light for some people, because it makes the person very sensitive to external inputs. Such a person living the 'enforced' rajasic lifestyle of society, which means enduring the hustle and bustle of city life with its pollution, traffic jams, and stale, air-conditioned offices with flickering fluorescent lights and irritating companions, simply can't cope with it.

People who want to, or rather have to, live such a life need to boost their diet with some rajasic foods. Many people, especially those who are trying to live a yogic life, have spoken to me about their daily stress levels. They are amazed that despite their yoga practice, meditation and

all the other ‘nice’ activities they do, they are still getting angry, tense and generally stressed. When they add some animal protein such as dairy and eggs to their diet, they are able to settle down and cope with the demands life makes upon them.

The typical rajasic diet is precisely those described by Sri Krishna in the following verse:

The foods that are bitter, sour, saline, excessively hot, pungent, dry and burning, are liked by the rajasic and are productive of pain, grief and disease. (17:9)

The diet of the West has been, and for many sections of society still is, one with plenty of ‘animal proteins’, especially meat, fish and poultry, as well as rich sauces and alcoholic drinks, and has been the preferred diet for several generations.

The foods liked by the tamasic are those which are stale, tasteless, putrid, rotten, refuse and impure. (17:10)

This may still apply in some countries, but the typical tamasic diet of the developed countries of this day and age are the ‘junk food’ diets consisting of food treated with artificial colours, flavours, preservatives and a myriad of other chemicals. Such people like fatty foods laced with plenty of sugar and salt, preferably packed in garish plastic containers that can easily be thrown in the street to ‘decorate’ their environment.

To get a small perspective on this, take the example of the juices people like. The sattwic person will like freshly squeezed juice from organic fruit, the rajasic person will like their juice from large cartons or bottles, and won’t mind the addition of some sugar and perhaps even colour booster and preservatives. The tamasic person will prefer the so-called soft drinks, which are composed of water, sugar, chemicals for colouring and flavouring, and carbon dioxide for the fizz and stimulation.

Sacrifice

That sacrifice which is offered by people without desire for reward as enjoined by the ordinance (scripture), with a firm faith that to do so is a duty, is sattwic or pure. (17:11)

If, for instance, you sacrifice your time for the benefit of other people and the world, believing it to be your duty, then that sacrifice of yours is sattwic. Many such people give their time freely to their churches, ashrams and charities, simply because they have the time and skills available and they are needed; they don't ask anything in return, not even praise.

The sacrifice which is offered, seeking a reward and for ostentation, is rajasic yajna. (17:12)

“Everybody! See how wonderful I am, I have given so much money to this charity.” Some rich people build temples which are named after them, ensuring that their name lives on perpetually. Still, these people who have built the temple have done a good deed, which is laudable, however rajasic their motives may have been.

They declare that sacrifice to be tamasic which is contrary to the ordinances of the scriptures, in which no food is distributed, which is devoid of mantras, gifts and faith. (17:13)

If we take this out of the context of ritual, it means that such people appear to be giving their service for good, but are actually messing up the job and making the situation worse. Take for example a person who decides to sacrifice his time by tending to someone who has been injured, which sounds like a kind thing to do. However, because he knows nothing about First Aid, he makes the victim worse. In this case the ‘ordinances of the scriptures’ are the teachings of First Aid.

Austerities

Austerities are generally thought of as practices where you go without something, with a motive for self-improvement. It can vary anywhere from sensibly just making our life simpler

to some of the more courageous yogic sadhanas, such as the *panchagni sadhana*, austerity of the five fires, performed by Swami Satyananda over a number of years.

Sattwic austerities: Note that Sri Krishna deals with these as thought, word and deed, and they really boil down to simple controls of the body, speech and thinking patterns:

Worship of the gods, the twice-born, the teachers and the wise, purity, straightforwardness, celibacy (continence in the satisfying of all desires of the flesh including sexual desires) and non-injury, are called the austerities of the body. (17:14)

Apart from the devotional recommendations at the beginning, which are typical of much of the *Gita*, these austerities are the ethical considerations such as can be found in the yamas of Sage Patanjali and the other spiritual-ethical systems. The same applies to the next verse on the quality of our communication with others, and indeed on the subsequent passage that deals with the quality of our thinking and our attitudes. Of course, it is only sattwic if we have no personal motive or expectation.

Speech which causes no excitement (negative emotions in others), truthful, pleasant and beneficial, the practice of the study of the Vedas (and other spiritual writings such as the Gita), are called austerity of speech. (17:15)

Serenity of mind, good-heartedness, self-control, purity of nature – this is called mental austerity. (17:16)

This threefold austerity, practised by steadfast people, with the utmost faith, desiring no reward, they call sattwic. (17:17)

Rajasic and tamasic austerities:

Austerity which is practised with the object of gaining good reception, honour and worship, and with hypocrisy, is here said to be rajasic, unstable and transitory. (17:18)

During my travels around India as a swami during the late 1970s, I met a man who claimed to be gaining

enlightenment by having stood on one leg for twenty-four hours a day for many years. He said he had not lain down in all that time, nor had he stood on both legs. On questioning him regarding his spiritual aims in doing this, his replies were vague, and it seemed that his main aim was to gain enough attention to make a modest living from donations. The above verse brought him to my mind.

That austerity which is practised out of a foolish notion, with self-torture, or for the purpose of destroying another, is declared to be tamasic. (17:19)

‘Self-torture’ at first seems to be a strange statement, but consider what can often be seen in the news: suicide bombers dying ‘for the purpose of destroying another’, and believing that is what God wants them to do. This is the ultimate example of tamas.

Charity

Sri Krishna is talking here about giving gifts, but it applies to all areas of charity such as giving our time, knowledge, information, skills, etc.

That gift which is given to one who does nothing in return, knowing it to be a duty to give in a fit place and time to a worthy person, that gift is sattwic. (17:20)

It is also sattwic to give charity anonymously. Jesus said, “Don’t let your left hand know what your right hand is doing.” It may even be a gift of your time and effort, but do it quietly. Also, giving a gift to a person who needs it is sattwic, but giving it to a rich politician is rajas, and giving a gift to the Mafia or other ‘evil’ people is tamas. Sri Krishna says:

And, that gift which is given with a view to receive something in return, or looking for a reward, or given reluctantly, is rajasic. (17:21)

An old adage is: “God judges the generosity of a gift not by how much you give, but by how much you have left.”

The gift that is given at a wrong place and time, to unworthy persons, without respect or with insult is tamasic. (17:22)

Swami Niranjana says that it is necessary to carefully plan how you are to distribute charity, and a good example of this occurs in our own ashrams in India, where tens of thousands of poor villagers receive essential items regularly. The whole operation is organized with precision, so that all of those people can attend and receive their gifts in an orderly fashion.

In an example of tamasic giving, Swami Niranjana describes an occurrence in one of the peripheral ashrams in India. Having received a donation of new blankets, the swamis put them on the back of a truck, took them to the local town and shouted, "Come and get your free blankets!" They were mobbed by the people of the town, all falling over each other trying to get as many blankets as they could. The gathering became so violent that the swamis had to drive away to protect themselves, throwing the remaining blankets on to the dusty road.

With the idea that all this belongs to God . . . acts of sacrifice and austerity as well as acts of charity of various kinds are performed by the seekers of blessedness expecting no return for them. (17:25)

Sri Krishna is implying here that one's acts of sacrifice, austerity and charity will bode well for one in one's spiritual life, but they must be given, of course, without any expectation of personal gain. He adds that one must have faith in the idea, "I am not really giving this, because it all belongs to the Lord, and I have just been the custodian of it." He goes on to say that without that faith there is no positive result. This is a big task, because most people would think, "I worked hard for this; it is mine, so I can donate it as though from myself." Remember though, as we discussed in the chapter on sacrifice, without the intervention of the Supreme there will be no result, no matter how hard we work. Recall the analogy of the farmer; no matter how hard

he works to prepare the planting, without the rain there is no crop. This is why Sri Krishna adds:

An oblation that is offered, a gift given, an austerity practised, or whatever good deed is performed, without faith, is all termed as naught; therefore, it is of no avail here or hereafter. (17:28)

How do we accomplish actions?

Now Sri Krishna deals with the mechanism of our actions. He compares the various ways in which people having different guna-predominance experience knowledge and perform action. He also compares the qualities of the person performing the action, other life-abilities such as intellect and firmness, and the preferred pleasures of life.

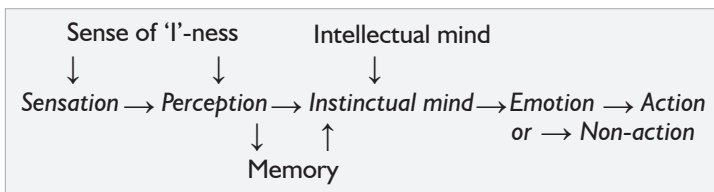
The Samkhya system teaches that we accomplish all actions through the following: the body, the doer, the various organs of perception, the different functions of various organs of action, and also the presiding deity. (18:13–14)

Who is ‘the doer’? Most interpretations consider ‘the doer’ to be the ‘ego’ or the *ahamkara*, but it may include the whole mind, called the *antahkarana* in Sanskrit, which is composed of the ego and three other elements: the memory and unconscious, *chitta*, the instinctual mind, *manas*, and the intellectual mind, *buddhi*, from which wisdom arises.

What is ‘the presiding deity’? Swami Chinmayananda suggests that it means the five elemental forces or powers of the five senses – vision, hearing, taste, smell and touch – known as the *tanmatras* or subtle elements – which allow us to make contact with our world.

Whatever action a person performs with his mind, speech and body – whether right or wrong – these five are its causes. (18:15)

How would western psychology look at this? In exactly the same way that Sri Krishna has been explaining it. This is a description of the typical input-output (stimulus-response) mechanism of a human being, as explained in *Practical Yoga Psychology*.



Some things to note in this diagram are as follows:

1. *Agreement between yoga and psychology*: This is an area where the yogis and western psychologists have reached the same conclusion, and yoga has Sanskrit names for these:

- The organs of sensation are called the *jnanendriyas*.
- The sense of 'I'-ness, the ego, is called *ahamkara*.
- Memory is called *chitta*.
- The mind functions – perception, thought and emotion – are *manas*.
- The higher mind is called *buddhi*.
- The organs of action are called the *karmendriyas*.

2. *'I'-ness*: The sense of 'I'-ness or of individuality (*ahamkara*), which separates 'me' from 'you' or 'it', is necessary for self-preservation and the process of clear perception. Some people, such as those suffering from schizophrenia or brain damage or who are under the influence of psychedelic drugs, have a weak sense of I-ness and a blurred sense of self that results in perception that is faulty. This faulty perception then affects their thinking, emotions and behaviour. At the other end of the spectrum are the people having a strong sense of I-ness, of separateness, which can result in isolation and even a sense of being alienated from others.

3. *Perception*: What is perception? It is the process whereby a person's sensory stimuli, whether arriving in the brain through the faculties of sight, hearing, smell, taste or touch, are translated into organized experiences that have personal meaning for him or her. For example, when we visualize some external thing through our eyes, the first step is that the retina receives millions of dots of coloured light. These dots are converted into nerve impulses which then travel to the visual areas of the brain, where, via the process of

perception, they are translated into whole experiences of sight and vision that have personal meaning for us, such as the form of a person we recognize.

4. *Memory*: When 'I' perceive something, it is instantly checked with my memory storage centre through a rapid process of questioning: 'Have I seen one of these before?' 'What is it?' 'What meaning has it had for me in the past?' Then the conscious mind takes over. Chitta, the memory, also includes the often unrecognized and deeply submerged contents of the unconscious mind, which are stored in the form of impressions, called *samskaras*. We are not aware of these because they are repressed, but they still can affect our perception, thinking, emotions and behaviour. One of the abilities of yoga is to bring these into our awareness so we can deal with them and strip them of their power to affect us.

5. *Mind*: Basically the mind thinks, 'That's a lion coming, I want to avoid it' or 'That's my loved one, I want to embrace her/him'. There may be other variations on this theme, but the main concern of the instinctual mind is self-preservation, and preservation of the species. At the animal level this fundamentally means attraction to pleasurable experiences such as food and sex, and avoidance of painful experiences such as an encounter with the lion.

6. *Emotion*: If real action is called for, it is usually 'energized' by an emotion, which gives urgency to act, and motivates the whole operation.

7. *Action*: At the instinctual level, the level of the untrained animal, if the perception is meaningful enough to cause an emotion, it will automatically go on to some sort of behaviour. This is usually an action, such as attacking if the animal is angry or hungry, escaping or playing dead if it is afraid, or a reflex such as wagging the tail if it is happy. Some tamasic human beings are still at this level. At the higher human level, rational intellectual thinking intervenes in the region of lower buddhi, and we can choose either better ways to act or not to react at all. If we decide to act, we assess what is likely to be the most appropriate thing to do and the best way to do it.

Why is Sri Krishna telling us this?

This is what Sri Krishna is telling us, though here it is being viewed through a more modern lens. However, why is he going into such detail about this process of sensation leading to action? It is not just for the sake of talking, that is not his style. Maybe he is giving all of this analysis so that we can observe these subtle stages of functioning within ourselves in order to do something about them. If we realize what is going on, and from where in our body-mind unit it is generated, we can influence it for the better.

Now he continues to tell Arjuna that action is motivated by three things: knowledge about some object, the object itself, and the knower. He also mentions that the mechanism of action, that is, the way we do things, is motivated by three things: the action itself, the actor, and the organs through which it is performed. In other words, the key points to be understood regarding motivated action are threefold: what is known, the action based on that, and the person doing the action. He says:

The Knower, knowledge and the object of knowledge are the three things that motivate action. The three constituents of action are the doer, the organs and the activity. (18:18)

As we now have a clear picture of the knowledge, the actions directed by it, and the one who acts, we can go back to considering different aspects of the person and lifestyle according to the guna that is most active in that person:

In the branch of knowledge dealing with the gunas or modes of Prakriti, knowledge, action and the doer have been declared to be of three kinds according to the guna which predominates in each, hear them from me. (18:19)

Knowledge

Sattvic knowledge is that by which one sees the one Indestructible Reality in all beings. (18:20)

To see God in everyone and everything is not easy. When you are in a good mood, sometimes you can see the godliness in someone, but as soon as the person is nasty to you they look like the devil. So presumably, we need to be predominantly very sattwic to even start seeing God in everyone. However, there are many other areas of knowledge that can be of a sattwic quality. The wisdom of high *viveka*, discrimination and discernment, and the knowledge gained in an enlightenment experience, are certainly sattwic.

Rajasic knowledge sees in all beings various entities of distinct kinds as different from one another. (18:21)

The person under the influence of rajas cannot see the underlying unity of spirit in all, but is flexible enough to see the variety in all. In comparison, the tamasic effect is not flexible, and under its influence one only sees people as rigid stereotypes such as ‘All those foreigners are bad, you can’t trust them’, ‘My religion is the only one that is true, everybody else is wrong’ and ‘They are all out to get me’. This is typical tamasic bigotry and paranoia, where the person is preoccupied with the body.

Tamasic knowledge clings to one single effect as if it were the whole, without reason, without a truthful foundation, and trivial. (18:22)

Some of my patients used to say tamasic things to me like, “All women are rotten.” I would answer, “No, not all of them, I have been married to a lovely lady for over forty years, and she has been a wonderful blessing in my life.” If I was feeling cheeky I would add, “Maybe we get the woman we deserve”, but sometimes they wouldn’t see that as funny. Of course it is not surprising that they had poor relationships with women when they went into each relationship with that attitude. Isn’t it interesting how our attitude about people, either positive or negative, creates a response from them that justifies our original positive or negative attitude? This is a

potent source of either vicious or virtuous circles. Now, what about the actions and then the actor?

Action

Sattvic action is ordained (complying with spiritual law), is free from attachment, and is done without love or hatred, by one who is not desirous of any reward. (18:23)

Here Sri Krishna is restating what he has said many times before throughout the *Gita*, but he has used the words ‘without love’. What is meant by that? Swami Chinmayananda puts it nicely in this example: You hurt your toe. You have special concern for your hurt toe, but no greater love for it than any other part of your body, because you see it as part of the whole. In the same way, the sattvic person sees everyone and everything as part of his own spiritual personality, and so acts in a neutral way. Ramananda Prasad interpreted it as “. . . without likes or dislikes . . .” The Gita Press version writes “. . . without any partiality or prejudice . . .”

Rajasic action is done by one longing for the fulfilment of desires or gain with egoism or with much effort. (18:24)

Once again Sri Krishna is restating what has been said before, but what is the meaning of the phrase ‘with much effort’? When we are acting in a sattvic way things go smoothly, and the progress is lubricated by divine grace, which supplies everything we need, when we need it, to accomplish the work in the best possible way. However, when we act from greed or conceit, it is like swimming against the stream. With sattvic motives and action, divine grace helps us. With rajasic motives and action, divine grace says, “You are on your own.” We also attract other rajasic people around us and they make things difficult for us, because they are concentrated on fulfilling their own desires, often at our expense.

Tamasic action is undertaken from delusion, without a regard for the consequences, loss, injury and (one’s own) ability. (18:25)

An example would be driving your car drunk and at twice the speed limit. On one occasion when I was in Naples, I saw a young man on a motor scooter careering through a red traffic light, narrowly avoiding the cross traffic while talking animatedly on his cell phone. That action was certainly done ‘without a regard for the consequences’, and was certainly tamasic.

The actor

‘Actor’ doesn’t mean the person up on the stage, because a good one can play any of these parts. It just means the person who is performing an action.

The sattwic actor is free from attachment, non-egoistic, endowed with firmness and enthusiasm, and is unaffected by success or failure. (18:26)

In other words, he is practising karma yoga in its fullest sense.

A rajasic actor is passionate, desiring to obtain the reward of actions, greedy, cruel, impure, moved by joy and sorrow. (18:27)

From the *Gita*’s original Sanskrit verses, a few important words have been translated by various versions to mean slightly different things in English. When comparing the versions of the translated *Gita*, one can see that these subtle differences are worthy of some commentary. For example, in the version used here, the Sanskrit word *ragi* has been translated to mean ‘passionate’. In English this word usually implies some action done with a lot of emotion or a person filled with emotion; however, ‘ragi’ can also mean ‘lustful’, a more precise descriptor of rajas. The word *himsatmaka* is translated here as ‘cruel’, but running more along the lines of rajasic behaviour is the translation of this same word into ‘violent’, as ‘cruel’ is more apt for describing tamas. Perhaps Swami Chinmayananda’s version, which translates this same word as ‘harmful’, is nearer to the typical rajasic characteristic. Of course, a person under the influence of

rajas can also be cruel unintentionally as a result of pursuing their own goals at the expense of others.

A tamasic actor is unsteady, vulgar, stubborn, cheating, malicious, lazy, despondent and procrastinating. (18:28)

Intellect

Now hear the threefold division of intellect (understanding) and firmness (resolve or fortitude) according to the gunas. (18:29)

The sattwic (pure) intellect understands the path of work and renunciation, what ought to be done and what ought not to be done, fear and fearlessness, bondage and liberation. (18:30)

The sattwic intellect knows what to do so that you can become liberated, and what not to do because it will hold you down in bondage. It also knows what is to be feared and what is not to be feared: “Fools rush in where angels fear to tread.”

With rajasic intellect, one wrongly understands dharma and adharma and also what ought to be done and what ought not to be done. (18:31)

Regarding dharma and adharma, the rajasic person will ignore their natural way of life if it does not give them the riches or fame they want, and they will go and do something that is completely inappropriate for them. They also get confused between what ought to be done and what ought not to be done, because the motivating force behind their life choices is desire and emotion rather than common sense and discrimination.

Tamasic (dark) intellect, enveloped in darkness, sees adharma and dharma and all things perverted. (18:32)

The tamasic nature cannot think properly, has poor reasoning and understanding, confuses what is appropriate and what is inappropriate, and so makes wrong decisions

and choices in life. It is difficult to think logically under the influence of tamas, therefore the conclusions and decisions made are not logical or sensible, and the behaviour that comes from them is inappropriate and may be quite destructive.

Tamasic thinking is also dull. Not only is the content of the thinking inappropriate, but the form of the thinking is slow and confused, and tends to get 'stuck'. It is like mentally swimming through mud.

The whole core of Cognitive Psychotherapy is managing this inappropriate thinking and preventing unfortunate outcomes from it. We expose the illogic nature of tamasic thinking and reinterpret it in a sensible and useful form. The good thing about Cognitive Therapy is that one has the aid of the therapist's (hopefully) more logical mind to interpret the errors in one's thinking.

A good psychotherapist can, over time, change a person's irrational thinking for the better. However, the problem here is that the therapist can only change that part of the person's thinking which is 'outside the norm' of the society to which they both belong, because the therapist is often caught up in the same social paradigm as the 'patient' without even knowing it! An enlightened person or guru doesn't have this problem, because the guru doesn't have a paradigm, as he or she has transcended them all. Due to this, the guru can see all the paradigms as if from above, and understand them all, including yours.

Unfortunately, it is difficult to correct one's irrational thinking without outside assistance if one does not have a logical mind, but the 'witness' position that we develop with yoga can help.

Not only is the thinking process itself distorted in tamas, but so also are the resulting attitudes, opinions and convictions, which can lead to destructive biases, bigotry, and so on. Rectifying this problem is really nothing more than common sense, but unfortunately common sense is not very common, especially at the tamasic level.

Firmness

By ‘firmness’ we mean resolve or fortitude; the ability to hold on to the correct situation or path without wavering.

Sattwic firmness is that due to which, through yoga, the functions of the mind, the life-force and the senses are restrained. (18:33)

This is restraint of any movement that would make us deviate from evolving in the path to liberation, *moksha*.

Rajasic firmness causes one to hold fast to life duties (dharma), enjoyment of pleasures (kama) and earning of wealth (artha), because of attachment and desire for reward. (18:34)

As we have already discussed, according to sanatana dharma the four goals of life are artha, kama, dharma and ultimately moksha. The rajasic person gets stuck in the rewards of the first three and fails to go on to the fourth. They may also become quite obsessed with their particular ‘favourite’ area of these, whether it be their work, their favourite source of pleasure, or their money; it takes most of their time, they are preoccupied with it, and it is their favourite subject for discussion. It is all they talk about, and when you are with them the conversation keeps getting steered towards that subject.

Tamasic firmness causes a stupid person to not abandon sleep, fear, grief, despair and also conceit (arrogance). (18:35)

As well as their obsession with ‘sleep, fear, grief, despair and conceit’, these people stubbornly hold on to irrational attitudes, decisions, emotions and behaviour, which may even become delusion: holding a fixed belief despite overwhelming evidence to the contrary. The whole thing can become psychotic. In addition, even though their life may be in tatters, they still maintain that their opinions and decision are the right ones, so they can still be quite arrogant. Of course, as we have already observed, ignorance and arrogance are natural bedfellows. Firmness is a good thing when it is sattwic and helping us to manage our life nicely,

but when it is the tamasic ‘stuckness and stubbornness’, it is a strong disadvantage.

Pleasure

And now hear from Me, O Arjuna, of the threefold pleasure, in which one rejoices and surely comes to an end of pain. (18:36)

That which is like poison at first but in the end like nectar – is declared to be sattvic, born of the purity of one’s own mind due to self-realization. (18:37)

The happiness that comes from our own personal effort, especially if it is swadharma in sadhana and selfless service, may even be arduous at the beginning. So may standing up for a right principle, or being truthful in the face of difficulties, but they lead to true happiness. This is opposed to simply pursuing pleasure:

Rajasic happiness arises from the contact of the sense-organs with the objects. It is at first like nectar, but in the end like poison. (18:38)

In the sattvic type, the motivation comes from inside, whereas in the rajasic it comes from outside. Rajasic people are capable of loving and being loved, of experiencing joy and giving joy, but at this rajasic level they have not yet become aware of the love and joy that they are inside, so they still believe that if they are to be fulfilled, they need somebody ‘out there’ to ‘give’ them love and joy. So their love is conditional, as can be heard in common phrases such as, ‘I will love you only if you love me’, ‘Promise me you will love me forever’, ‘Love only me’, etc. They believe that the only way they can experience joy is if it comes to them from outside. They think of the feeling of bliss as a sexual experience with another person.

The trouble with ‘needing’ someone else to give you love, joy or pleasure is what happens when they turn off the supply. You feel empty, unloved, resentful, angry,

dejected, maybe even jealous – not very good emotions for a relationship. And this is exactly what is happening in so many relationships in our world today.

We need to raise our level of awareness to sattvic levels where we can experience our own love and joy within, and then we can give them to others without needing anything in return. The whole theme of the *Gita* is about just this.

The pleasure that comes from satisfying a desire from outside creates another problem; it often becomes displeasure when the stimulus wears off, or when the pleasant stimulus is not available the next time the desire comes up. The other problem stems from the fact that the pleasure decreases as it is repeated, so a stronger stimulus or a different one is demanded; a circle that never ends. As was mentioned in Chapter 11, this is partially a physiological effect caused by reduction in secretion of one or more of the nervous system chemical transmitters that are related to the feelings of pleasure, such as dopamine and endorphins.

That happiness which at first, as well as afterwards, deludes the self, and which arises from sleep, indolence and heedlessness – that is declared to be tamasic. (18:39)

An example of bad tamasic pleasure is enjoying someone else's suffering, or even worse, inflicting that suffering on them oneself. A typical type of entertainment that would give pleasure to a tamasic person would be blood sports such as cock-fighting, dog fights, or bare knuckle street-fighting. An example of rajasic entertainment would be a body-contact team sport such as some types of football. An example of sattvic entertainment would be watching a ballet or listening to Mozart, kirtans, bhajans or other sacred music.

We must always remember the difference between pleasure (pursuing the stimulation of the senses) and happiness (the positive experience especially gained by helping others or making other contributions to the wellbeing of the world).

We are all in here somewhere

*There is no being on earth or again in heaven among the gods,
that is liberated from the three qualities born of Nature. (18:40)*

The following summary of the above is from *The Bhagavad Gita – Abbreviated* by Harry Bhalla, published by the International Gita Society.

In the mode of sattwa, one:

- Possesses the knowledge by which one sees a single (undivided) immutable reality in all beings.
- Performs obligatory duty without likes and dislikes, or attachment to the result.
- Enjoys sensual pleasure with senses under control.
- Is free from attachment, non-egotistic, has resolve and enthusiasm, and is unperturbed in success or failure.
- Has intellect by which one understands the path of work and the path of renunciation, right and wrong action, fear and fearlessness, bondage and liberation.
- Has the resolve by which one manipulates functions of the mind and senses for God-realization.
- Enjoys pleasure from spiritual practice resulting in cessation of all sorrows.
- Enjoys pleasure that comes by grace of Self-knowledge.

In the mode of rajas, one:

- Sees different realities of various types among all beings as separate from one another.
- Abandons duty merely because it is difficult, or because of fear of bodily trouble.
- Performs action with ego, selfish motives, and with too much effort.
- Is impassioned, attached to the fruit of his work, greedy, violent, impure, and is affected by joy and sorrow.
- Cannot distinguish between righteousness (dharma) and unrighteousness (adharma), or between right and wrong action.

- Craves for the fruit of work, clings to duty, accumulating wealth and enjoyment with much attachment.
- Enjoys sensual pleasure without control over the senses.

In the mode of tamas, one:

- Has worthless knowledge by which one clings to one single effect (such as the body) as if that is everything.
- Abandons obligatory work due to delusion.
- Undertakes action because of delusion; disregarding consequences, loss, or injury to others.
- Is undisciplined, vulgar, stubborn, wicked, malicious, lazy, depressed, and procrastinating.
- Accepts unrighteousness (adharma) as righteousness (dharma), has one's intellect covered by ignorance.
- Does not give up sleep, fear, grief, despair, and carelessness.
- Considers the body or oneself as the sole agent due to imperfect knowledge.

It is obvious that the lifestyles of people who are predominantly ruled by sattwa, rajas or tamas are very different indeed. We might imagine it as the sattvic person flowing with the universe, the rajasic person playing dice with the universe for personal gain, and the tamasic person desperately fighting with the universe to extract from it a little bit of pleasure to ease their pain.

Yoga and the teachings of the *Bhagavad Gita* are all about the evolution of the person, which simply means elevating our consciousness from the miserable tamasic levels to the blissful sattvic levels and beyond. This process can also be augmented by the grace that flows to one through the guru, and directly by divine grace, as Sri Krishna so aptly explains to us in his eighteen-chapter dialogue with Arjuna on the battlefield of Kurukshetra.

Glossary

Adharma – disharmony, not fulfilling one's natural role in life, unrighteousness

Ahamkara – egoism or self-conceit, the self-arrogating principle of 'I'

Ajapa japa – continuous, spontaneous repetition of mantra, often coordinated with the breath

Ajna chakra – the third eye; the command or monitoring psychic and pranic centre also known as the guru chakra, corresponding to the pineal gland

Anahata chakra – psychic centre in the region of the heart

Ananda – pleasure, happiness, pure unalloyed bliss; state of consciousness

Antahkarana – instrument or tool of consciousness; the mind composed of manas, buddhi, chitta and ahamkara

Antar mouna – inner silence; meditative technique belonging to the fifth step of raja yoga or pratyahara, consisting of six stages: 1. Awareness of sense perception 2. Awareness of spontaneous thought process 3. Posing and disposing thoughts at will 4. Awareness of spontaneous thoughts and disposing them at will 5. Freedom from thought 6. Awareness of sleep state consciousness

Apana – one of the five pranas, moving downwards from the navel to the perineum governing lower abdominal region, responsible for elimination and reproduction

Artha – the earning and accumulation for use of material things

Ashram – dwelling or abode of spiritual practice and asceticism

Ashrama – stage, order or period of life lasting about twenty-five years, of which there are four: bramacharya (student life), grihastha (householder life), vanaprastha (forest-dwelling/retirement), sannyasa (total renunciation)

Atman – the individual, immortal spirit within each individual; the self beyond mind or body; the principle of life

Aum – universal mantra; the vowels represent the three states of consciousness: ‘A’, the waking state; ‘U’, the subconscious; ‘M’, the unconscious, the whole reverberation of which represents the superconscious state; also written as ‘Om’

Avidya – ignorance; lack of conscious awareness

Bhagavan – illustrious one; God; deity; epithet of Vishnu, Shiva, Buddha, etc.

Bhajan – devotional song; praise

Bhakta – devotee

Bhakti – complete devotion to the Higher Reality of life; love of all beings

Bhakti yoga – yoga of emotion; channeling emotional energy to a higher reality of life

Brahma/Brahman – God as creator, one of a trinity of Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva

Brahmacharya ashrama – the life of the student; one of four ashramas

Brahmin – the priestly caste; one of the four varnas

Brahmarandhra – the crown of the head, through which the soul is said to escape from the body at the time of death

Buddhi – discerning, discriminating aspect of the mind

Chakra – psychic centre or energy centre; wheel or vortex

Chidakasha – the space or sphere within, where capacity of sense perception is internalized to observe the process and reaction of individual awareness

Chidakasha dharana – concentration on the inner space of consciousness

Chitta – individual consciousness, including the subconscious

and unconscious layers of the mind; the stuff of the mind and storehouse of samskaras; memory

Dharana – concentration or complete attention leading to meditation; the sixth stage of raja yoga

Dharma – natural role one plays in life; ethical law; duty, virtue and righteousness; one of the four aims of human existence

Dwesha – repulsion and aversion towards things one does not want

Gita – song; name given to certain sacred writings in verses, particularly recognized as referring to the *Bhagavad Gita*

Grihastha ashrama – the life of the householder; one of the four ashramas

Guna – quality; attribute or characteristic of all creation; three in number; tamas, rajas and sattwa

Guru – one who dispels the darkness of ignorance; teacher, preceptor

Havan – sacred fire ritual

Himsatmaka – of the nature of violence; one who does injury to others

Janaka – father; progenitor; name of a famous king of Videha or Mithila who was the foster father of Sita

Jivatma – individual or personal soul; the unique collection of personal karmas, tendencies and memories that survives death along with the individual spirit

Jnana – wisdom, knowing, understanding

Jnana yoga – the yoga of knowledge and wisdom attained through spontaneous self-analysis

Jnanendriya – the five organs of perception (ears, skin, eyes, tongue, nose)

Jnani – one who practises the scheduled discipline of the path of knowledge

Kama – lust; the fulfilment of desire for sensual pleasures

Karma – action and result; action in the manifest and unmanifest dimension

Karma yoga – surrendering all activities to the higher power; the yoga of action

Karmendriya – the five physical organs of action (hands, vocal chords, feet, anus and genitals)

Karuna – compassion, mercy, kindness

Kaurava – relating to the Kurus; descendants of Kuru who fought in the Mahabharata war against their cousins the Pandavas

Kshatriya – a person of the kingly or warrior class; one of the four varnas

Mahabharata – epic of ancient India said to be composed by Vyasa on the history and consequences of the great battle between the Pandavas and Kauravas. Consisting of eighteen chapters, of which *Bhagavad Gita* is one

Mahasamadhi – final liberation experienced on the departure of the soul from the body; death

Manas – the finite, rational mind concerned with senses, thought and counter-thought

Manipura chakra – psychic/pranic centre located behind the navel in the spinal column; associated with vitality and energy; centre of willpower

Mantra – subtle sound vibration; yogic and tantric tool which liberates energy from the confines of mundane awareness and expands the consciousness when repeated

Mantra yoga – path of yoga which liberates the mind through sound vibration

Maya – illusion; partial understanding; wrong or false notions about self-identity

Moksha – liberation, freedom, release; liberation from the ‘wheel of samsara’, or the cycle of births and deaths

Mooladhara chakra – the basic psychic and pranic centre in the human body situated in the perineum in men and the cervix in women; the seat of kundalini

Muni – sage; one who contemplates

Nirguna – without quality or attribute; formless

Nirguna Brahman – Brahman without attributes or form; a state of pure being without qualities (gunas)

Nirvana – cessation of suffering, final liberation or emancipation in Buddhist thought; higher state of awareness or existence

Niyama – observances or rules of personal discipline to render the mind tranquil in preparation for meditation; the second step of ashtanga yoga mentioned by Sage Patanjali in the *Yoga Sutras*

Panchagni sadhana – the highly advanced spiritual discipline or austerity of facing five fires, four in each direction and the fifth as the sun above, performed when the sun is strongest or on its northward path

Pandava – a son or descendant of Pandu; the five brothers: Yudhishtira, Bhima, Arjuna, Nakula and Sahadeva, who fought against their cousins the Kauravas in the Mahabharata war

Paramatman – the Supreme Spirit; the atma (self or soul) of the entire universe; the liberated state of the inner self

Patanjali, Sage – an ancient rishi who codified the meditative stages and states of samadhi into the system of raja yoga, famous as the propounder of ashtanga yoga and the author of the *Yoga Sutras*

Prana – vital energy force, essence of life permeating both the macrocosmos and the microcosmos; the principle of life

Prasad – a blessed gift or object; favour, grace; food dedicated to a god or guru and then eaten by faithful devotees as something holy

Pratyahara – to cut off one's awareness from the input of sensations; closing off to external perceptions by ignoring them, and opening up to internal experiences by letting them come into the awareness; the foundation of meditation.

Purusha – literally 'who dwells in the city', the Supreme Consciousness or soul dwelling within the body, which is the dormant receptacle; the totality of spirit

Purushartha – human attainment; the four goals to be filled in life: artha (the earning and accumulation for use of the material things), kama (the fulfilment of desire for sensual pleasures), dharma (conducting life in the most personally appropriate, moral and ethical way), and moksha (the liberation from the 'wheel of samsara', the cycle of births and deaths)

- Raga** – attachment; love, affection; passion, amorous feelings; likes and attraction to things one wants
- Ragi** – passionate; lustful; a person under the influence of raga
- Raja** – king, ruler, chief
- Rajas** – one of the three constituent qualities (gunas) of nature; dynamism; creativity combined with full ego involvement; emotion; restlessness; oscillation; as a personality trait it is expressed by the desire to dominate
- Rajasic** – pertaining to rajas; egotistical, personally ambitious person
- Raja yoga** – yoga of awakening the psychic awareness and faculties through meditation; most authoritative text is Sage Patanjali's *Yoga Sutras*
- Rama, Sri** – hero of the epics *Ramayana* and *Ramacharitamanas*; the seventh incarnation of Vishnu as son of King Dasharatha, representing righteousness, virtue and honour; slayer of the demon Ravana, which was the purpose of his incarnation; perfect husband of Sita
- Ramayana** – literally 'the path of Sri Rama', one of the most famous ancient Indian epics composed by Sage Valmiki, containing approximately 24,000 verses in seven chapters
- Sadhana** – spiritual practice or discipline performed regularly for the attainment of inner experience and self-realization
- Sakshi** – the 'witness' position
- Samatvam** – equanimity under all conditions, making no distinction between friend or foe, pleasure or pain
- Samatvam yoga** – the yoga of equanimity
- Samsara** – the illusory world; the 'wheel' of birth, death and rebirth; mundane existence
- Samskara** – deep mental impressions from past experiences, stored as an archetype and unnoticed by the conscious mind, which set up impulses and trains of thought that guide one's actions; influence, idea, notion
- Sanatana dharma** – system of eternal values underlying vedic civilization; a system of dharma that applies irrespective of the society or the time; the eternal law which controls

the whole universe; the traditional philosophical belief and social system of India

Sanskrit – literally ‘well done’; the original vedic language which is the source of vedic scriptures

Samkhya – one of six systems of Indian philosophy attributed to Sage Kapila; spiritual science dealing with the twenty-five elements of creation; the philosophical basis of the yoga system, continually re-verified by yoga practices

Sanchita karma – the sum total of all actions done by the living being (the jiva) during countless previous births, out of which a portion is allotted for every new birth

Sannyasa – dedication; complete renunciation of the world, its possessions and attachments;

Sannyasa ashrama – the life of the renounced spiritual seeker; the fourth ashrama or stage of life

Sattwa – one of the three constituent qualities (gunas) of nature; state of purity, harmony, luminosity, equilibrium and steadiness

Sattwic – unselfish and socially beneficial people

Satyananda Yoga – an internationally renowned school of yoga founded by Swami Satyananda Saraswati in the mid-twentieth century, in which the various branches of yoga (hatha, bhakti, karma, raja, jnana, kundalini, mantra, etc.) have been integrated and the practices systematized for application to modern lifestyles; also called Bihar Yoga

Seva – offering oneself wholly for a higher cause; doing work for the Lord or the guru (guru seva)

Shaktipat – higher energy or experience transmitted by the guru to a worthy disciple; descent of power through worship

Shankaracharya, Adi – the name of a celebrated teacher of the Advaita Vedanta philosophy; the enlightened sage who is said to have established the Dashnami order of sannyasa

Shudra – one of the four varnas or divisions of the caste system of India; the servant

Sita – the name of the daughter of King Janaka, and the perfect wife of Sri Rama. She is the heroine of the

ancient Indian epic *Ramayana* and *Ramacharitamanas*, who remained faithful and undaunted when captured by demon king Ravana

Swadharma – one's best and most appropriate direction in life and the duties associated with that life course, according to the qualities of one's own personal inner nature

Swadhisthana chakra – literally 'one's own abode', the psychic and pranic centre situated at the base of the spinal column in the sacral region (at the level of the generative organs) and the storehouse of subconscious impressions

Tamas – one of three constituent qualities (gunas) of nature; inertia, instability, stillness; ignorance, mental darkness; illusion, error and unwillingness to change

Tamasic – pertaining to tamas

Tanmatra – subtle nature; the quality or essence of the elements and the associated five senses: sound, taste, touch, smell and sight

Trataka – to gaze steadily; a concentration practice of gazing with unblinking eyes at one point to focus the mind

Vaishya – one of the four varnas or divisions of the caste system of India; the merchants

Vanaprastha ashrama – the third stage of life, traditionally from the age of 50–75 where one retires from worldly life in order to practise sadhana in relative seclusion; the life of developing renunciation

Varnas – the four principle orders of the Indian caste system (viz., the brahmin, the kshatriya, the vaishya and the shudra, originally classified according to the differentiation of the guna and karma predominant in each, and their corresponding duties)

Vasana – the latent tendencies for one to always act in the same way, propelled by samskaras; cravings, desires; the cause of birth and experience in general

Vijnana – intuitive ability of mind; higher understanding; knowledge and wisdom; knowledge of manifest Divinity

Vishuddhi chakra – 'centre of purification', the psychic and pranic centre located at the level of the throat pit or the

thyroid gland; the centre connected with communication and purification

Vyasa – name of the great sage who wrote the *Brahma Sutra* and the *Mahabharata* (which includes the *Bhagavad Gita*), considered to be an incarnation of Vishnu

Yama – self-restraints or rules of conduct which render the emotions tranquil; the first of eight limbs in the ashtanga yoga of Sage Patanjali's *Yoga Sutras*

Yajna – sacrificial rituals; in the *Bhagavad Gita* there is a parallel meaning concerning performing actions in the world as an act of sacrifice

Yoga – union; the root is 'yuj' meaning to join, to concentrate one's attention; method of practice leading to conscious union of the human being (atman) with the Universal Existence or Brahman

Yogi – an adept in yoga; a person who is at the top of spiritual evolvment, and has the nature of sattwa

Yuga – age, aeon; the four yugas are Kali, Dwapara, Treta and Krita (Satya), each having general qualities ranging from tamasic to sattwic. The four yugas together make up one Mahayuga; one thousand Mahayugas make a day of Brahma, which is 4.320 billion years, and another thousand Mahayugas make a night of Brahma. Therefore, a day and night of Brahma is 8.640 billion years, and it is interesting to note that the recent scientific estimates of the age of earth are around 4.5 billion years

Yuga dharma – the values of society and the world in general, which are in constant flux

Notes



Dr Rishi Vivekananda (Dr Brian Thomson, MBBS [Syd], MANZCP, DPM) has been a physician for over 45 years, and a consultant psychiatrist for over 40 years. During most of that time he has explored ways to integrate the techniques of yoga with modern knowledge of the mind, body, and healing.

He was initiated into poorna sannyasa by Swami Satyananda in 1976, and from 1977 to 1986 he travelled the world teaching and learning about the synergy between yoga and science.

Dr Rishi Vivekananda was initiated into rishi sannyasa by Swami Niranjanananda in 1993 and appointed an ambassador of Satyananda Yoga in 2002. He currently resides at Mangrove Yoga Ashram, Australia.



SATYANANDA YOGA
BIHAR YOGA

The *Bhagavad Gita* is one of those unparalleled works in the history of the world that has something for everyone. Any perspective that one wishes to see life from, this book of seven hundred verses written over five thousand years ago, has the answers pertinent to that perspective.

Thoughts on Gita delves into Sri Krishna's discourse to Arjuna from the psychological point of view, to find solutions to the dilemmas and mental struggles one faces in everyday life. The author, Dr Rishi Vivekananda, a practising psychiatrist and yoga teacher for over forty years, uses the wisdom gleaned from his chosen path in life to reveal an insightful understanding of the *Gita* and its relevance to every individual. Written in an easy style full of humour, *Thoughts on Gita* takes one closer to understanding one's mind and one's place in the world.

